

YANKEE POODLE

Books by C. H. Gibbs-Smith

PICTURE BOOKS ON MR. CHURCHILL AND MR. ROOSEVELT

BASIC AIRCRAFT RECOGNITION

GERMAN AIRCRAFT

THE AIRCRAFT RECOGNITION MANUAL

BALLOONING

MAN TAKES WINGS

THE GREAT EXHIBITION OF 1851

A HISTORY OF FLYING

OPERATION CAROLINE

TANKEE POODLE

YANKEE POODLE

A Romantic Mystery

by

C. H. GIBBS-SMITH



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For I.

Having no colours but only white and black,
To the tragedies which that I shall write.

—JOHN LYDGATE (*circa* 1440)

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FIFTH AVENUE,
NEW YORK CITY,
N.Y.

DEAR SON (as Uncle used to address us both),

I expect you saw that Gabriele Melville has died. As she was the last of those surviving who had any reason to object to his adventures being published, I see no reason why you should not go ahead with the idea you and he discussed when he was alive. In fact, I am sure he would have wished it after all the work you both put into the project.

From what you said when we last met, I gather it was the Austrian affair you would intend doing first, as the old man's journal for that year was one of the most complete, even before you made him work over it with you. I so well remember him saying to me—it must have been after your last visit—that it was the most 'messed up' year of his life. "You know, son," he said, "I wanted to really get down to what the boys in Europe were doing with those new-fangled flying machines, and go right along with them—as well as selling a few 'steamers' and having my fill of the Covent Garden opera season. And then what? Before I could turn round in bed I was up to the neck in trying to help poor old

Peter Melville, and flirting with murder and sudden death into the bargain. Well, I saw precious few aeroplanes or operas that year—and only sold a few 'steamers'—but Peter got his girl, bless her, and I had fun." Wasn't that just like him? I wish he were here to see the book; but, as you know, he said he would never allow publication while Gabriele was alive. He was so thankful that she never discovered the truth about her father and brother, although to the end of her days she often wondered why her father had such a sudden change of heart about her marriage to Peter.

I hope you realise what great pleasure you gave him in his old age by going through his journals with him and making him recall those days which now seem so far off, and in many ways so attractive.

Let me have your news soon. Ann sends her love.

Yours ever,

(Sgd.) John F. Chester.

P.S. I enclose a snapshot of Julius V., Julius's great-great-grandson. Ann and I were determined to keep the poodle line going. As Uncle Howard lived with us in his later days, it was easy to take over the dynasty. As you see, we still keep to the famous trim, which has now become one of the accepted versions of the Royal Dutch style!

A Pride of Sphericals

ON that glorious Saturday afternoon of May, 1907, Ranelagh wore the mood of a miniature Ascot. The fresh green foliage of the surrounding elms rose in a picturesque background to what might have been a lollipop garden in a pantomime, or a scene out of *Alice in Wonderland*. The brightest blooms, walking the grass or standing in variegated groups, were the women in all their trailing finery, surmounted by the bulks of hugely feathered headgear and foiled by the top hats and frock-coats of the men. But the most exotic members of this floral kaleidoscope swayed gently above the heads of the fashionable crowd—ten great white balloons, stirring restlessly in the light breeze and waiting for their crews to go aboard. Then they could be set free and off into the sky.

The Aero Club of Great Britain was holding its first point-to-point of the season. But the resemblance to an equestrian event almost ceased with the title; for the race would be run in silence, and none but a few chance countrymen would witness the finish. The judges would first choose some recognisable landmark about forty miles away—in a line with the prevailing wind—and the pilot who could coax his powerless mount to a

landing nearest the goal would win the prize. Today the point was Goring railway station, by the Thames.

One of the competitors was an American, Howard L. Chester—L for Lowell—who was at this moment in a red-nosed taxicab which spluttered vibrantly across Putney Bridge on its way towards Ranelagh. Chester's large bulk lolled across the passenger seat, smoking one of his favourite Hoyo de Monterey cigars. By focusing attention on his immediate surroundings he sought to avoid thinking about the race he would probably miss and the woman from whom, contrary to his general practice, he was running away. It was not a situation he was accustomed to, or cared for. He was, in his own words, "mightily fond of the ladies," especially if they were intelligent as well as handsome. But being both rich and a Yankee, he often found it tiresome to fend off fortune-hunting widows and designing mothers who hopefully trailed their daughters in his path. To counter these approaches he had developed a technique of adroit side-stepping and avoidance, which generally succeeded. But not with Mrs. Isobel Drummond. She—he almost said damn her—was different. First of all he was not sure what she was after, his money or his life. Then, disconcertingly, she exposed to view a stately, sleek, and seductive person, but without benefit of brains. She was, therefore, whatever her motives, a woman to be side-stepped. But no device had succeeded in halting her embarrassing pursuit of him since their chance meeting at a dinner party last month, soon after his

arrival from New York. She either had an uncanny instinct, or an excellent intelligence service to aid her in appearing at the same dinners and other functions, and making the most pointed advances when they met there.

Chester was now unusually upset. He had been considering every expedient—except perhaps striking her—and had decided uneasily that downright rudeness might be the only way to put a stop to the business. Only this morning she had sent a letter by District Messenger inviting him tonight for dinner at her house in Hertford Street. It was a letter phrased in almost indecently endearing terms, and he had sent back a note declining, with the excuse that he would be out of town.

Chester sniffed the familiar smells of oil and hot leather with professional pleasure, and let his eye move critically over every inch of the taxi he rode in, comparing the design and workmanship with similar cars produced in America. Machines were his world and he was at peace amongst them. But his mind was drawn inevitably back to Mrs. Isobel Drummond, and he continued to feel baffled and annoyed. If only Stella Barrington were here to advise him. Stella knew so much about her own sex that she would know instinctively what to do. She would first laugh at him for not being able to deal with the situation for himself; then—taking pity on him—would suggest some subtle but successful solution. But Stella was in Zürich,

recuperating from an appendix operation, and Zürich was a long way to go for advice about women. No; he would definitely have to be rude to Mrs. Drummond, but only as a last resort. If that had no effect? Well, he would cross that canyon when he came to it.

In such unhappy condition he was conveyed to Ranelagh through the bright spring sunshine. The taxi ground up the drive, changed into low gear and began nosing its way to a stop by the congregation of fashionable turn-outs which were drawn up near the polo ground. Here and there a few motor-cars stood stiff and metallic beside the restive horses and the chatting grooms, their tiered bodywork a tribute to an ancestry of carriages, and their brassy bonnets concealing a power nostalgically measured by the pull of horses.

As Chester reached for his top hat and got down from the taxi, a gleaming silver car caught his eye. He paid the cabby and walked over to the machine. Despite his late arrival he could not help but linger for a minute to inspect this masterpiece of engineering. He and all the others who took an interest in such matters had seen, or at least heard of, the new Rolls Royce 'Silver Ghost', the personal motor-car belonging to the Honourable C. S. Rolls, who would at this moment be preparing to travel in another of his exotic vehicles, the balloon 'Nebula'. He must get Rolls to show him the details of this latest creation; but now he, too, was to go ballooning, both for his peace of mind and for its own peculiar exhilaration.

He walked away from the carriages, through the screen of trees, and came in sight of the meeting. All was colourful bustle: the sight of men, women and balloons at Ranelagh always put him in a good humour, and today he needed them particularly. Colonel Capper's 'khaki-clad Royal Engineers, along with the teams of volunteer helpers, immaculate in straw hats and white duck, were engaged in removing surplus ballast, holding down the baskets and assisting the aeronauts to climb in. But a single glance told him that there was no 'Brünnhilde'; her lemon-yellow silk would stand out clearly from her rivals, all of them chalk-white. What on earth could have happened to his beauty? Then he caught sight of her crown above the heads of the crowd, over by the polo pavilion. That meant something was wrong: she was not ready.

To avoid the clamour of welcomes and how-are-yous, he made his way quickly round the outskirts of the crowd, and soon came in full view of his balloon. She was only three-parts inflated and seemed to grow out of the ground like a giant mushroom, with the canvas gas-pipe emerging from the folds of her fabric and snaking away over the turf. Well, that was that; whatever the reason, he would be out of the race today.

Just then he caught sight of Mason and hailed him. The man turned, removed his derby, and hurried up to Chester.

"I'm so very sorry, sir. We've had trouble with the valve this morning, and it took a long time to find what

had jammed it. It turned out to be a very small stone under the rim, which we failed to see." Mason looked very dejected.

"Don't worry," laughed Chester, "it can't be helped. If you couldn't find the trouble no one could." Mason looked less dejected. Dear Mason, he thought, if anyone could get a balloon ready on time it was he. He would not go up in the air for a sizeable fortune—the Chester steam-cars were his real loves—but after his employer had taken up ballooning as a sport some two years ago he had, loyally made himself a formidable expert on everything to do with 'sphericals', except flying the creatures.

"I think I will still go up later on, Mason, if they will let me; so provision her normally. Meanwhile, I must pay my respects to Mrs. Harbord and the others and see them off—then I'll be back."

He turned towards the elegant assembly and went to seek his friends. First he found one of the starters, Charles Singer, and reported himself as being out of the running.

"What a pity, Howard; and it was to be 'Brünnhilde's' first race. You've only been up in her once, haven't you?"

"Yes, it's a pity, but there is nothing we can do about it now. But does anyone mind if I go up afterwards on my own?"

"My dear fellow, no: by all means go up. Always glad to have you in the sky with us," he laughed and

turned to answer a question from one of his stewards.

Chester said hello to one or two friends and was then lucky to find Mrs. Harbord talking to the Butlers. This intrepid little woman was one of England's foremost balloonists; but she could not fly in the race today as she herself had presented the trophy. Chester had always admired her, and only wished that the present style of hats had not been so overwhelming for someone of her small framework. He paid his respects, regretted missing her race, and then continued on his rounds. Rolls was already aboard 'Nebula': he called out to Chester, and after hearing the American's compliments on the 'Silver Ghost', offered to show him its secrets in the near future..

The competitors were now ready. All were in their baskets and waiting for the starters to give the word. Then the balloons were off, one by one, to the general accompaniment of farewell shouts and waving. Up they floated into the sunlight, like great white balls of cotton-wool—'Diamond', 'Lotus', 'Dolce Far Niente', 'Venus' 'Enchantress'—and drifted silently away over the trees towards Kew.

Chester found himself standing by an elderly but dapper man with a dark red carnation in his button-hole. He turned to Chester:

"What a pity Mrs. Harbord is not able to take part in her own race," he said, "I like to see the ladies go up—sort of makes the whole occasion more colourful and entertaining."

"I quite agree with you, sir," replied Chester, not knowing exactly what was meant, "but there are quite a number on board today—— Look, here are the Cappers taking off now!"

As he spoke, Colónel Capper and his wife—she was very smart in boater and shirtwaist—sailed over their heads in 'Pegasus'. The Colonel looked a little worried, but his wife was leaning out of the basket waving to her friends.

Suddenly, a little way off, a commanding and earth-bound voice shouted: "Look out, ladies!" But the warning came too late. Colonel Capper had hurriedly tipped out nearly half a bag of ballast to get more lift. Down below there broke out a flurry of laughs and cries of dismay where a group of stately but agitated matrons were trying to shake sand out of their feather boas, and also rocking their heads decorously from side to side in a vain attempt to dislodge the ballast from their hats without dislodging those noble structures from their heads.

To Chester's surprise, his companion burst out laughing.

"Serves them right for wearing those monstrous hats," he exclaimed happily. "When I was a boy the same thing happened at our charity bazaar, but some of the sand went down the mouths of the band's trumpets—then there was trouble, I can assure you!"

"And what, may I ask, is wrong with these monstrous hats of ours, dear Colónel Medley?" said a woman's

voice behind them. The sun was put out for Chester at that moment, for the voice belonged to Mrs. Drummond. Both men turned and raised their hats; the old man with elaborate courtesy, Chester as if mechanically saluting a corpse.

"But, Mr. Chester—what a delightful surprise!" and her hand went out to touch his arm in a presumptuous gesture of intimacy, Chester found himself numbly wishing that the ballast had fallen on Mrs. Drummond, and at the same time admiring the dashing figure she cut in a creation of sky-blue with a huge feathered hat set a little rakishly on her red-gold hair. He regarded her with admiring animosity and prayed for some means of escape.

"But I thought you said you were going to be out of town—or did I not read your note aright?"

He bowed slightly: "You did indeed read aright, Mrs. Drummond," and noticed the disappointment in her face: "My lateness in leaving Lady Malcolm's lunch, and an unfortunate accident to my balloon—over there—have postponed my departure. But I am going up as soon as she is ready."

"What, in those clothes?" She managed to laugh.

"Dear lady, it is far from unheard of in our Club to ascend in formal clothes. Although neither comfortable nor convenient, there is no objection to the practice, and indeed it sometimes adds a certain piquancy to the sport, especially when landing in the more outlandish countryside."

Mrs. Drummond had no time to reply; for with a hasty: "You'll excuse me, I'm sure," Chester suddenly made off amongst the crowd like one possessed.

"What odd fellows these Americans are, don't you think?" said his elderly companion to Mrs. Drummond.

"Peter!"—Chester nearly shouted the name in his excitement, as he caught up with his quarry—"Where on earth did you come from and why are you here, of all places?"

A slight and perfectly tailored figure wheeled round, and the firm but almost feminine face was suddenly transformed from sadness to delight.

"Howard, at last! I've spent the day in tracking you down and your man said you were somewhere in the crowd. I simply couldn't wait by your balloon so I came to search for you. Oh, boy, isn't it good to see you!"

They pumped hands and then stood back to look at one another, oblivious of the amused and slightly patronising glances around them. It was nearly three years since they had last met; and that is a long time to pass without seeing one's closest friend. The two men had first become inseparable at Yale, despite their differing tastes, to say nothing of their different appearance. They had been known as Beauty and the Beast in college, where Melville had been as renowned a campus editor as Chester had been as a right tackle on the football squad.

It was because of their differing tastes that the pair

could now only meet at rare intervals. For Melville had entered the Diplomatic Service, where his delightful personality and cultivated intelligence had won him a second secretaryship long before his time; and Chester had gone to join his father and elder brother in the family business. Grandfather Chester had made a fortune by building some of the best locomotives that ever puffed their way across the prairies or hauled strange merchandise in most of the tropical landscapes on earth.

Although he had loved every minute of the time in the factories—adding practical experience to an engineering degree—Chester's whole heart was not in the work. As his brother lived and breathed railway locomotives, he himself had taken up the design, and later the sale, of a pet side-line of their father's, the Chester steam-car. They both knew that petrol, and not steam, was the power of the future, and that all the world was by now buying petrol-driven automobiles. But they had more money than they knew what to do with, and it pleased both father and son that he should play with the fine 'steamers'—for (and make no mistake) they were fine cars, silent and powerful, and expensive. Chester also came to act as a sort of ambassador of the firm; and that was what took him to Europe almost every year, and turned him into quite a cosmopolitan. It was in Europe that he first took to ballooning; it was in Europe, too, that he also first became sold on the believe that aeroplanes would one day be practical vehicles. But that is another story.

As he looked Peter over, it was obvious that all was not well with him. The sensitive handsome face looked wan and, despite his habitual smartness of appearance, he seemed to droop within his clothes. Something, and something serious, had gone wrong, thought Chester.

"Howard—as I said—I've been chasing you all day, hoping to catch up with you. Now I've caught you, I'm not going to lose you. Can we talk this evening?—I suppose you'll come back to town later, won't you? As you obviously see, I am not at my best."

"Of course," said Chester, "if it's urgent I will cancel my trip; I'm out of the race, by the way, because 'Brünnhilde'—that's my balloon—isn't ready. I was only going up for fun."

"No, no; for heaven's sake; it's not that urgent and I can easily wait."

Then an idea struck Chester: "Peter, why not come up with me? We can talk a little in the air, land near a decent inn and spend the evening there."

"What! like this?" he exclaimed, instinctively plucking at his frock-coat and looking down at himself.

"Oh, that's nothing. Quite a number of members have joined their friends at the last minute in these affairs. The only people at all surprised at the apparitions we shall make will be the yokels; and they will have a good tale to tell over their beer."

Melville smiled and nodded: "I've never been up in my life, but I would rather like to try. And what better

garb in which to go up to heaven—especially for two Yankees in an alien heaven!”

The two men walked slowly, arm in arm, towards the pavilion, Melville explaining that he had travelled a week sooner than he expected and that he had detailed ~~WEEK SOONER THAN HE EXPECTED AND THAT HE HAD DETAILED~~ this in a letter which had obviously not yet arrived.

A considerable crowd had already gathered around ‘Brünnhilde’, realising there was another take-off to come. The rest had wandered off to the tea tents.

“Now,” said Chester, “isn’t she a beauty? Specially built for me by Shorts, who have not made a silk balloon for years. My last one—‘Stella’—was too small for long trips; she only held twenty thousand cubic feet. This one is an eighty-thousand-footer.”

“Who do you name them after?”

“Well,” laughed Chester, “‘Stella’ was called after dear Stella Barrington—you met her in New York, do you remember? when she was singing Mimi in *Bohème*—but she wouldn’t let me name this one ‘Stella II’. Said she was plump, but not that plump! So I called my new lady after a wonderful figure of a woman I fell for at Bayreuth last year—Lotte Maybach—who is the reigning Brünnhilde in Germany. Just like her, too—full-bodied, silky and spectacular.”

‘Brünnhilde’ was now in full sight, riding free of the ground and anchored with sandbags. The basket was being fixed—‘toggled’ in ballooning jargon—to the hoop by three burly Royal Engineers. The pale yellow envelope was patterned like a giant quilt where the meshes of the net pressed deep into the soft fabric; and

round the equator marched the letters 'BRÜNNHILDE' in bold blue capitals. The Stars and Stripes fluttered gaily from the rigging. Chester was very proud of her.

The two men were pushing and excusing themselves through the black cloth and the coloured silks and feathers, when a rising tide of laughter and clapping engulfed them. They peered ahead to see what was happening.

Over the edge of 'Brünnhilde's' basket had appeared a head—a black curly head—with large and darkly-almond eyes which surveyed the company with some disdain. An affected voice near Chester asked:

"Whatever is that, my dear, in pity's name?"

And the answer:

"Don't be foolish, Gertrude: it's a poodle. Everyone in London knows Howard Chester's poodle. His name is Julius. But I forgot: you've been so long on the Continent that you haven't kept up with society dog life. If only the wretched man would trim the animal properly, and not do such *outré* things—and, my dear, against all the best advice of all the best poodle fanciers. But you know what Americans are, with all their strange ideas."

Meanwhile, Julius, having won his audience, rolled his eyes to one side and drew back his lips in that attractive grin which only poodles can achieve. Then he disappeared from view. The crowd sent up a clamour of applause.

"Is he yours?" asked Peter as they emerged into the clearing around the balloon.

"Yes; name of Julius, as you've just heard—he wasn't born the last time we met. I thought I wrote you about him. He always does something to get attention if he feels I have been neglecting him; and today I have, poor beast. He is the best dog I've ever had and despite all the tea-party women who plague me to have him given a lion trim, I refuse. I prefer him to look like an elegant dog, not a comedian; so I have him done after my own fashion as you will see—leg-of-mutton trim for his legs, shaved amidships, pom-pom on tail, and head with top-knot and moustaches.*

Having greeted Mason and introduced Melville, Chester leant into the basket and lifted Julius into his arms; the dog gave his master an enthusiastic lick before thrusting his head over Chester's shoulder to look at his admirers. Chester then put the poodle down on the ground and gave him a push; off he went, in his somewhat prancing gait, and was soon lost to view behind the pavilion.

The next few minutes were spent in checking equipment and supplies with Mason—including emergency food and wine—before they were ready to go aboard. They then stowed their top hats on the floor of the basket and climbed in—not a very graceful manoeuvre for a man of Chester's bulk.

They caught sight of Julius as he wormed his way back through the trousers and skirts—there was no need for

*Chester was here anticipating what later was to become known as the Royal Dutch trim, which now has a number of variants.

him to make such a detour—and Chester called out to him to be quick. He jaunted towards the basket and then took a running jump on to the edge, where Chester caught him, ruffled his ears and put him on the floor.

"Let's try for lift," Chester called out; and two of the soldiers started unhooking the sandbags whilst the third put his hands on the basket. Soon the balloon was in equilibrium and the man could hold it down with a finger were it not being rocked from side to side by the wind. One more bag was taken off for a quick lift and a firmer military grip taken of the basket. All was now ready for take-off.

"Steady," called Chester, "I'm breaking the neck now." He pulled the slip-knot to open the neck: "Ready! Let go!"

All of a sudden the great sphere above them stopped swaying, the ground began to fall away, and they were looking down upon a confusion of black hats, coloured feathers and upturned faces, amongst which handkerchiefs fluttered like cabbage-whites. Standing alone on the groundsheet was Mason, his derby raised in farewell.*

"Get up and take your bow, Julius—yes, now, look sharp!"

Julius put his paws up on the seat board and looked over the edge. The cheers below again swelled, and then faded away as the balloon swept silently above the trees.

Lady in Distress

"WHAT a wonderful view!" exclaimed Melville, "and what a peculiar feeling it gives one."

They were passing low over Kew Gardens, and down below the thousands of Saturday visitors made bright blobs of colour as they walked the carefully tended lawns or lay in clusters surrounded by lunch-baskets and parasols. They were like variegated flotsam on a great green sea, with the fresh green trees rising like leafy islands.

Chester felt himself relaxing, and also a little guilty of his enjoyment when he thought of Melville and his troubles.

"How do you mean, 'peculiar'?"

"Well, it's difficult to explain. First the absolute silence up here; and then the curious way everything seems to come towards us and pass by underneath as if we ourselves were standing still and the landscape was on a great roller being slowly unwound for our benefit."

"Yes," said Chester, dipping a silver sauce ladle into a bag of ballast and emptying it slowly overboard, "all the balloonists since the Montgolfiers have remarked on that—it's because we go at the pace of the wind and therefore have no sense of movement. But listen! Do you hear?"

Some fields beyond the Thames were passing below them, and up from a coppice came a rising clamour of bird song.

Melville was leaning over the edge of the basket. "It really is amazing," he said, "down below one hears only a little of the sound—an earthbound selection—but up here we get whole acres of bird song. It's like a huge avian orchestra."

They remained silent for a few minutes as the balloon sailed on. Only the occasional creaks of the rigging disturbed the quiet. The sun was now hidden behind clouds, and from time to time Chester ladled out a little ballast to keep them as near as possible in equilibrium, and hence in level flight. Julius lay sprawled on his rug, asleep. The sound of a train whistle came to them thin but distinct from far away to the south.

"Howard, I must burden you with my story. I shall split open at my spiritual seams if I don't tell someone; and you are the only person I can trust." Melville still kept his eyes on the landscape below, but they were not regarding it.

"Is it that bad?"

"More than bad. It's nearly desperate as far as I am concerned. You remember I wrote you that I was being transferred from Vienna to London after little more than a year in Austria?" Chester nodded and gave an answering grunt. "Well, the reason is that pressure was brought to bear on the State Department in Washington to have me removed."

"Removed? Pressure? My dear Peter, what on earth do you mean?"

"There is a mighty powerful customer in Austria by the name of Laufenthal—Count Friedrich von Laufenthal to give him his full name and title. He has a huge Schloss near Innsbruck, another one farther up the Tyrol—no, I forgot, he sold that after his son's death—a *palais* in Vienna and large estates all over the country, especially in Styria. He has a daughter named Gabriele"—he dwelt long on the name in the German fashion, 'Gubri-ay-lèr'—"We are in love and want to marry. But the Count won't allow it. That's the story 'in a nutshell,' as they say."

Small shrill cries floated up to them, and they saw two children waving to them from a garden. Then a dog ran out of the house and barked. Julius slept on.

"Hey, hey, my boy," said Chester, "that's no story for an American to tell; let alone a respectable member of the Diplomatic Corps. Good heavens, man, this is the twentieth century! Go ahead and marry her! To blazes with papa, no matter how many *Schlösser* he owns." Melville still did not look up from his vacant gazing, but Chester saw a spasm of pain cross his face.

"Peter; I'm dreadfully sorry—I didn't mean to be flippant. You know I don't mean it that way: I didn't realise quite how deeply you felt. But seriously, if you are in love with one another, surely the wretched father doesn't matter that much. You've got plenty of money for two."

"You don't realise at all," Melville said despondently; he straightened his body and leant back against the car lines. "You've been all over Europe—you ought to know. These old families can be the very devil, if they dig their heels in. And what is so ghastly is that their upbringing—at least a girl's—builds into them a deep filial loyalty and obedience. If that is appealed to, it can wreck everything; and any feeling, however strong, will be undermined or at least confused to a standstill. Gabriele is as much in love with me as I am with her, but her father's disapproval and blunt refusal has put the poor girl in a dreadful state of agitation and grief from which she is powerless to escape."

"But have you asked her? I mean, have you definitely asked her to elope with you?"

"Oh, Lord, yes. But she said that she could not bear her father's disapproval—it would amount to a sort of curse—which would be with her as long as she lived, and destroy her happiness like a poison. I told her that as far as I was concerned I was quite willing to resign from the Service. In any case I should be dismissed if I caused a scandal of that kind."

Chester still felt a little bewildered. It all seemed so unreal. He thrust the ladle into the sand almost angrily and turned to his friend.

"But goodness gracious, Peter, apart from all that, what in heaven has the man got against you? A full-blown Second Secretary, an obvious Ambassador of the future—or at least a Minister—good looks, good



family, enough money and brought up a Catholic—albeit not a very strict one! Heavens above, what else does he want? He must be a maniac!”

“I know, I know. But he is as proud as Lucifer, loathes all foreigners—especially Americans—and would consider any one of his huntsmen better bred than we are. Added to which, he is bent on joining two of the great Austrian families, his own and the von Stauffels, and getting some of their land into the bargain. There is a Fritz von Stauffel who has been singled out as the lucky man; blast him to hell! But I suppose it’s not his fault.”

“Have you actually spoken to the Count?” asked Chester. His own trivial annoyance with Mrs. Drummond now paled into insignificance beside this tragedy. For tragedy he now realised it was. He had, of course, met many of these ancient Continental families, and heard many tales of ruthless arrogance and determination. But to have an example thrust right under his nose, and to find the victim of it his closest friend, made him furious.

“Spoken to him?” laughed Melville ironically, “I should say I have. There was one first and final interview in which he ordered me to stop writing to his daughter—he had already stopped my seeing her—and said that if he heard of any further attempt on my part to disobey his orders he would demand my removal from Vienna as *persona non grata* with the ruling classes of the state to which I was accredited. Oh, he is a real swine. You see, Gabriele and I had been meeting secretly,

especially in Vienna during the Season, and it was some time before he realised what was happening. Then Gabriele told him I was only a good friend, but she soon gave the show away, poor dear, and confessed to him she was in love with me."

"And then what?" Chester was despondently looking down at the lush, retreating countryside, and was not even conscious that the balloon was now in full sunshine, and rising rapidly. The coal-gas was expanding and blowing down through the neck; and it was not till the smell became nauseous, that Chester glanced up. As if galvanised by an electric current he suddenly shot out his arm and smashed down on to Melville's hands. Melville opened his mouth to cry out, but shut it quickly. Then his face went chalk white as he watched his box of matches, the cigarette, and the single match he was about to strike, turn lazily over and over as they fell harmlessly away, soon to be lost to view against the cottages of a sleepy village below.

"I'm terribly sorry, Peter," exclaimed Chester, laying his hand on his friend's arm. "There was not even enough time to shout. It was my fault. I should have warned you about not smoking. It is second nature to us. You see that pipe up there?" They both looked up at the great shining sphere above them, from which dangled the open neck. Melville nodded. "That is open all the time in flight, so that the gas can blow off safely when it is heated and expanded by the sun. Otherwise 'Brünnhilde' would burst. We keep her flying by a

judicious juggling between the weight of our ballast and the lifting power of the gas, both of which are expended in our up and down runs. When we get rid of all the sand, except what is in those red bags, we have to come down—that is our emergency supply.”

By this little speech Chester hoped to bridge over the anxiety and embarrassment he thought Melville must be feeling.

“It’s my fault, Howard—what a complete damned fool I am. Even I might have known that a gas balloon contains gas, and gas goes *pouf* if you put a match to it. Really, I’m very ashamed of myself.” They both laughed.

“You know,” said Chester, “there was only one man who ever got away with it—smoking in a balloon, I mean—that was Sir Claud de Crespigny. He is a member of our Club and an experienced balloonist. But he completely forgot himself once when on a cross-Channel flight and went the whole way to France peacefully smoking a cigar! It just so happened that the day was overcast and the balloon was easy to keep level with no blow-off. No blow-off—no coffin for Crespigny.”

“Where was I?” said Melville, now sad again.

“Your Gabriele had told her father she was in love with you, and he had warned you off.”

“Oh, yes; that was the beginning of the end. We managed to exchange a few letters by way of her maid—Anna—who is a dear. I used to write through Anna’s sister in Salzburg, who passed my letters on via Anna to

Gabriele. But even that route was discovered. Gabriele had just written me that she was forced to stop, and I had written back telling her to have faith and that I was determined to find a way to persuade her father. I don't know if that last letter of mine ever reached her." He paused. "Oh, God, Howard, I have been in such misery ever since. I didn't even know such unhappiness was possible or bearable. I didn't even care much when our Ambassador sent for me and told me I should have to be transferred. The Count, you see, had carried out his threat. The Chief was very nice about it all—he didn't like the Count any more than most of us—but he had been summoned to the Austrian Foreign Office and told fairly brusquely that he must get rid of me. So that's the story. What on earth can I do? I can't see anything I *can* do. Do you think there is any possible way I can get round that brute? Even in asking that question, I know there isn't. Everything seems to be crashing about my ears."

Chester was so upset by this story that he decided to land as soon as possible and carry on their talk in more conventional surroundings where he could give his whole attention to it.

"I think we will land soon," he said, "I want to think this thing out. There must be a way. We must *make* a way! But let's get down first."

Neither of the friends spoke for the next few minutes as Chester examined the map which he had clipped on to a projecting board, and then searched the landscape

ahead of them. Windsor Castle was approaching them, a little to their south.

"I think we will try for the fields beyond Eton," he said finally. "It looks as if we are making for them, and we should cross the High Street just north of the bridge."

The Thames valley was spread below them, and the castle looked like a huge mound of grey stones as it humped up from the surrounding countryside. Soon they were only a mile or two away from their objective, and Chester pulled gently on the valve line to vent gas and bring them lower. The outlying fields and the red-brick buildings of Eton College came steadily towards them and Chester then kept the balloon at five hundred feet. The shouts of greeting from boys and townspeople were now rising up to them clearly. They were soon across the High Street and the rich green of the fields beyond came to meet them.

"Peter, look out now! Hold on to the edge of the basket and hold tight—don't on any account hang on to the car lines, as you will risk having your arms pulled off. As we touch down, flex your knees—and go on clinging."

"All right, Howard, I've got it. It looks as if we shall be down in a minute."

Chester, one hand pulling the valve line, shouted a warning to the people in the field, who took up the cry until all the holiday trippers were aware of 'Brunnhilde' floating smoothly down over the field, and were careful to keep out of her way. With the other hand.

Chester pulled the end of the crimson ripping-line out of its little red canvas bag so that it hung free for immediate use. Then he gave another long pull on the valve line and, judging his distance to a nicety, suddenly transferred his hand to the ripper and gave it a strong tug, then two more tugs. 'Brünnhilde', her gas pouring out of the rent panel, touched her basket on the turf, dragged it a few score feet and then came to a stop, her great yellow envelope quickly collapsing into a crumpled heap beneath the net. The basket had been pulled over on to its side and the two aeronauts were half-sitting and half-lying inside, with Julius barking and trying to push his way out between them.

"All right to get out," cried Chester, "let's go." They picked themselves up from a jumble of top hats, provisions and ballast bags, to find a considerable crowd gathered round them.

"Want any help, guv'nor?" shouted a cheery voice.

Chester thanked the lad and called for two more volunteers to stow 'Brünnhilde' inside her own basket after her valve had been carefully removed and placed in its own canvas bag, and the sand ballast dumped on the grass.

To the three who had been helping, Chester gave each a half-crown, and an extra shilling to the one who agreed to stand guard over the balloon until she could be collected by the cart Chester would order to transport her to Windsor station.

Hearing with amusement the cockney remarks about

"Yankee toffs" and "glad rags", and having called Julius away from his admirers, who were patting him and making dog noises at him, the two men—hats in hand—strolled across the fields towards the Bridge House Hotel. Here they consulted the hall porter about a cart and gave him a substantial tip to arrange for 'Brünnhilde's' transport. Then they sent a telegram to Mason to meet the train that evening at Waterloo.

Sitting comfortably in deck-chairs on the hotel lawn overlooking the Thames, the two men at first said little. They stared moodily at the bridge and up beyond it at the castle. Chester found himself growing more angry every minute at the absurd and outrageous thought of a Continental Count patronising Peter Melville, and carrying on with those senseless old-fashioned notions about not allowing his daughter to marry whom she wished. He was on the point of saying the girl ought to have more spunk; but thought better of it and contented himself with reviling the Count and all his works.

"I know it's hard to understand," said Melville, plucking at the grass as he spoke, "but there are hundreds of old families who behave like that; and scores of girls as much in love as Gabriele is, who are so filial that even their love cannot conquer their sense of duty and obedience. The conflict is too great for them to deal with and their whole existence becomes confused and hopeless."

By this time Chester felt himself almost aboil:

"Well, all I can say is that we will damn well find a way to make the old buzzard give her up and—what is more—give her his blessing into the bargain. There must be a way. I shan't sleep till I've thought of a way," he ended angrily but lamely.

"Good old Howard," and Melville laid his hand on Chester's knee. "It does me good to hear you, but I don't believe anything can be done. I have churned it over and over in my mind until I'm nearly mad. I can see absolutely no way out. After all, one can't go out there with a pistol and order him to stand and deliver."

It was at this highwaymanly simile that Chester suddenly saw light. He heaved his large bulk out of the deck-chair and stood glaring down at Melville.

"I'm not so sure," he said aggressively, "Godamn it, I'm not so sure. You have given me an idea. Not a real pistol—oh no; that was for our fathers. But a mental pistol: what about blackmail?"

"Blackmail?" exclaimed Melville. "What on earth are you driving at, Howard? How in heaven's name do you intend to blackmail the Count?"

"That remains to be seen," thundered Chester; then noticing curious eyes turned towards him, he lowered his voice. "Look here, Peter, our firm has contacts and agents all over Europe. Somewhere, somehow, we will discover something shady about that damned Count. You are a diplomat, so your hands are tied. But I can do what I darned well please; and money helps, too."

Melville looked up with a sad smile. "I wonder," he

said, "I wonder. My hopes are with you—how could they help being—but my fears are there too."

' But Chester would have none of such pessimism ; and it was not until they had reached Waterloo that evening—with 'Brünnhilde' travelling in the guard's van—that Melville began succumbing to Chester's enthusiasm and determination.

Mason came cautiously down the platform, peering between the hurrying crowds, until he saw the two top-hatted figures—Julius trotting behind—who made an incongruous group amongst the returning trippers. Chester handed Julius over to him to take back to the Carlton, and told him that 'Brünnhilde' was in the van and had better spend the week-end in the luggage office until she could be carted to her storage at Shorts.

Then the two friends walked slowly towards the ticket gate, looking up as they went at the column of curling smoke which rose from their locomotive and swelled out iridescently against the glass roof of the station, now lit by the evening sun.

They climbed into a growler and told the cabby to go to Scott's, where they would have a comfortable late dinner amongst the gilt and plush of the grill-room.

Not until after the savoury did they reopen the discussion of Count von Laufenthal, when Chester asked Melville if he knew anyone with inside knowledge of Austrian affairs. "I shall use our business agents when the time comes," he added, "but it would be a great help

if we could first get an all-round picture of the beast and its habits before we dig for details."

"There is one man I know," said Melville thoughtfully, "who might give us a lead about the Count. He is a good friend of mine—John Elliott—who is at present Counsellor at our Embassy in Paris. He served for years in Vienna and has an encyclopædic knowledge of the country and its people. He knows most of what has happened to me, and I will write him that you have my complete confidence. You can paint the picture in more intense colours if you have to. I will tell him that you will impart as many of the additional facts as necessary about my miserable affair in the hope that he can help us. As a diplomat he will, of course, tell you nothing. But as a friend I am sure he will direct you to sources which he knows to be useful. Maybe there is a chance—just a chance—that you might find something useful."

He held up his glass of port against the light and looked at it for a moment: then he slowly drank it off. "But, Howard," he continued, "for heaven's sake don't get yourself into trouble: it doesn't matter about me any longer. But you will be very much a stranger in a strange land. The Count is ruthless and rich and powerful."

"Don't worry, old man," laughed Chester. "When it comes to this sort of business, he's not the only one who is rich, and—what's more—not the only one who can be ruthless into the bargain."

III

Prelude in Paris

ONE of Chester's enthusiasms was grand opera, and it was of course Stella Barrington who had first awakened it. Now it was almost a passion. His London agent had booked a veritable sheaf of tickets for the great season now commencing and Chester found his mind a battle-field on which the interests of a friend in need were in violent combat with the desire to see Melba and Caruso in *Bohème*, Mademoiselle Destinn and Caruso in *Aida*, and the same pair in *Madame Butterfly*. Then there was the *Ring* with Madame Gulbranson as the new *Brünnhilde*. It was terrible to contemplate missing all this.

Chester sat in the bar of the Carlton—he found the name 'bar' odd beside the 'café' of the Waldorf-Astoria where he liked to drink the day's first cocktail—and when the waiter came for his order asked, without thinking, for an H.P.W.

"Harry Paine Whitney," he explained; and on the man confronting him with a blank face remembered that that famous cocktail might not be known in London bars—yet, so asked instead for a Bronx, which he knew was safe even here.

He went again to work on his conscience and took out his engagement book. If he went to Paris straight

away he would miss Melba's first *Bohème*, but he was down for the second performance later on. The days immediately before and after the first *Bohème* were blank in any case, so he reluctantly struck the evening out of his diary and made a mental note to find another companion for the pretty Miss Stubbs, whom he had met on the boat, and to write her a profuse apology for his absence in Paris 'on business'. That way he could be back in time for the other performances. Otherwise, if he put off the Melville mission to Paris, he would miss a whole batch of his favourites. So Paris it was to be; tomorrow if possible. Melville had promised yesterday, when they had parted, to cable his friend John Elliott in Paris to expect Chester; and all that remained now was for Mason to see about the tickets and pack the bags.

He finished his drink and went upstairs to tell Mason, whom he found giving Julius his evening spoonful of Marsala before the dish of minced chicken which the chef would send up for the poodle's second meal of the day.

"Do you wish me to accompany you, sir?" Mason asked after he heard the news.

"No, Mason, but I will take Julius; I want you to stay and keep in touch with our agent. The new 'Steamer' will be over any time now and you must be on hand—by the way, I have decided on a name for her."

Mason's eyes lit up at the mention of the new car. It was to be delivered straight from the works in America

and be the advertising model for the season in Europe.

"And what is that, sir? I hope it will do her justice," he said, as though he doubted his master's ability to think of a suitable name.

"I got the idea from seeing Mr. Rolls's 'Silver Ghost' yesterday at Ranelagh—we shall call our new lady the 'Silver Steamer'. She is, luckily, to be a silver model, so it fits perfectly for a rival name."

Mason was visibly relieved. He smiled. It was not without much pain that he had given in where 'Brünnhilde' was concerned. Mason was sometimes a mild misogynist; at others he was a romantic. In his view the balloon should have been called 'Diana' or some other name befitting her companionship with the other Aero Club sphericals. He grudgingly accepted the fact that balloons should properly be regarded as females—despite some of the club members going against this principle—but to call their new fine lady after a fat character in German opera was hard for him to swallow. But 'Silver Steamer' was quite another matter.

"Oh, very good, sir! Very good, indeed! It will be a privilege to drive her. Have you informed the works, sir?"

"Yes; I sent a cable late last night, when I got back to the hotel, and told our agent here this morning. I shouldn't be surprised if they adopt that name for her in the States. But that's what she will be known as in Europe, at any rate."

Chester was putting on his evening clothes.

"Mason, you go off on your own tonight. I am taking Mr. Melville to see Miss Gertie Millar in the *Girls of Gottenberg*. I want to try and cheer him up," he added.

"Poor Mr. Melville; I would never think any woman worth so much anxiety myself"—Chester had outlined his friend's trouble to Mason that afternoon—"but I expect he feels like we did when Sir Edmund refused to sell us his 'Miranda'. Do you remember, sir? We felt very bad about it right up until the very day we went down to see 'Brünnhilde' at Shorts."

"Scarcely the same, Mason, you old cynic, scarcely the same; but I see what you mean." He patted his white tie and looked at himself in the mirror. "However, it's a damned good thing that I like 'steamers', balloons and the ladies; and you like only the first two. Cuts down the competition you know; what's more, it keeps you out of mischief and more firmly attached to me—and the 'Steamers'."

Mason was putting Chester's day clothes away in the wardrobe. "You will have your little joke, sir," he replied acidly. Chester laughed.

"Mr. Melville was very tickled when I told him about your expert knowledge of women's clothes and your disapproval of what inhabits them—said he'd never realised you were such a dark horse. I had to explain that so far as I knew you were perfectly genuine in your sentiments, regrettable as they may seem."

"I'm sure Mr. Melville will take your remarks with a liberal pinch of salt, sir. It's simply that I prefer to admire the female sex from a distance, as I've often told you, sir. I have had too much trouble with them near to, so to speak."

At this point there was a knock on the door and a page-boy announced that a Mr. Melville was waiting below in the lobby.

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As Chester boarded the Calais boat train at Charing Cross the next morning, the rain beat down on the station roof with a steady drumming, and succeeded in considerably depressing his spirits. He hoped it was not an augury of failure. All the way to Dover the rain continued to pour out of the sky upon the fresh green of the trees and hedgerows; and each town and village that slipped by the windows of the express left a melancholy impression of drab and glistening roof-tops. At Dover even Julius seemed depressed, and dragged on his lead as Chester followed the porter aboard the Channel steamer and into the first-class saloon.

Chester could take no pleasure—as he usually did—in the bustle and noise of the departure, and sat drinking a glass of indifferent port as the ship slid away from the landing-stage and made for the open sea, a curtain of rain blotting out the view.

And so it continued all the way to the French coast; and on through the flat countryside of the Pas-de-Calais,

with its poplars bent back by the sea winds of decades; and finally to Paris. Chester was only half cheered up by the beaming face of his burly porter who strode along beside him with the two bags slung over his shoulder on a leather strap.

"This damned rain has followed us all the way from London; I'll bet it's even the same cloud, too," he had said to the blue-overalled giant in fluent but execrably pronounced French—Chester could get his tongue round the German language but not the French—and had been answered by a deep guffaw and the words:

"Ah, monsieur, it is those grey English clouds, which they manufacture over there and send to torment our beautiful Paris—they are jealous, monsieur—but we will deal with them. This is the only day it rains over Paris for your visit—I promise you, monsieur."

Once inside the lobby of the Ritz, Chester regained the remains of his good spirits. He had the bags taken up to his room and then unashamedly spent half an hour just sitting in the lobby with Julius, gazing at the fashionable men and women who thronged the place. Chester loved crowds and, next to the Waldorf-Astoria in New York, a Paris hotel or a Paris boulevard was his favourite viewing post. The women were not as good-looking here—not by a very long chalk—but the international selection which streamed in and out were at least smartly dressed. People might laugh at Dana Gibson's typical American girl; but, goldarn it, there was no place on earth like New York to see an eye-ful a

minute for as long as your heart could stand it. He had even wrung such an admission from an unhappy French automobile manufacturer who once came as the firm's guest to New York. The poor man was flabbergasted at the selection of female beauty visible at any moment on the island of Manhattan.

Chester also liked the way people would come up and make a fuss over Julius—there was something stylishly attractive about a Frenchwoman petting a poodle—and they made him laugh when they scolded him for not having the dog lion-trimmed.

"Julius," he continually had to explain, "is more than a dog; he is one of the family. You can't have one of the family looking like a circus performer."

This had the effect—especially in his strangely-spoken French—either of setting the questioners off into fits of laughter, or driving them away in a patriotic huff, seeing that the lion-trim for poodles is *de rigueur* in France.

Chester suddenly remembered that although Julius had been given his chicken supper in the train, he had had no wine. So he took the poodle into the bar and much to the amusement of the other guests gave him his spoonful of Marsala and drank a glass himself. Then they went to bed.

The American Embassy in Paris was an impressive building in the Avenue Kléber and Chester had arranged an appointment there with John Elliott at four-thirty. After spending the morning with the Chester agent,

who strongly approved of the name 'Silver Steamer' for the new car, the prospect of seeing about poor Melville's troubles promised a pleasantly romantic contrast. He set off to the Embassy with a light heart. He had regretfully left Julius in the care of the head porter, as Melville had warned him that a love of dogs was not amongst John Elliott's many virtues. This was perhaps as well, because the second living being he saw inside the spacious hall of the Embassy was a tortoiseshell cat, and Julius hated that particular colour of cat. It would have been a pity to prejudice this diplomatic mission by starting a brawl as soon as he arrived. The porter who had opened the door was a large solemn footman in a sombre black livery, who gave him what Chester thought must be the second-class greeting—that reserved for rich compatriots who are not otherwise very well connected. It consisted of a slightly perfunctory bow and a hard satisfied stare at anything indicating the possession of money; which in Chester's case was a diamond tie-pin and a gold-headed cane.

John Elliott received him in a light and sunny room on the first floor and immediately offered him tea, which he accepted.

"I thought this was the American Embassy," said Chester, "not the British. But I guess the custom is quite a good one, even if it did start before the Revolution."

John Elliott smiled. He was a serious-faced man in his forties, with thoughtful blue eyes and a very

expressive and mobile mouth. Chester liked the look of him immediately.

Under the stony stare of a bust of George Washington, the two men started their discussion of Peter Melville and his troubles, and Elliott put Chester's mind at rest immediately by saying:

"I want you to realise at the start, Chester—if we may drop formalities—that, for the moment, I am going to talk as a friend of Peter Melville's, and not as a diplomat. So please be as frank as you like, and I will do everything I can to help."

Chester nodded his thanks and smiled.

"At the moment," continued Elliott, "all I know is how Melville stands—he has told me the details of his unhappy affair—and that you have a scheme for helping him which may not be quite—er—ethical, but which in the circumstances is all you have been able to think up. I also know, of course, who you are and your history. I wasn't very happy when Melville used the words, 'not ethical', but let us not jump that hurdle till we come to it. What did you have in mind, Chester, and just how unethical is your proposal?" He smiled, as if to make the question sound less judicial.

Chester told him of his idea of blackmailing the Count, although he was careful, even in this friendly atmosphere, not to use the actual word. He told Elliott quite frankly that he wanted both the background painted for him so that he would know what sort of a man he was up against; and also some hint of

where to go in order to find a story discreditable enough to the Count to make use of.

It was clear that Elliott was unhappy about this last, but—as he said two or three times—he felt that Melville had been treated so badly, and that the insult was as much to all Americans as it was to him, that he would do his utmost to help. As it happened, he said, the answer might be simpler than they feared.

“How do you mean?” asked Chester.

“Well, it just so happens that a lady of my acquaintance”—can it be that Elliott was turning slightly red, wondered Chester—“has on more than one occasion inveighed against Count von Laufenthal, and has as good as said that she knows of some incident in which the Count played a highly disgraceful part. I do not know what she refers to, and have never pressed her on the point. But I feel quite certain that there is a lot behind it; and a lot of unpleasantness, too.”

Elliott glanced sideways at Chester without turning his head. Chester just caught this glance and quickly transferred his own to George Washington’s nose, which was now throwing a sharp-pointed shadow on to the cream-coloured wall behind it.

“You will, I know, treat what I am saying with the greatest discretion,” Elliott went on, “because the lady in question is in a somewhat peculiar position.”

“Good lord,” exclaimed Chester sympathetically, “do you mean she is in his power?”

“Oh, no, no,” he said, hastening now, and again

blushing, "she follows a rather curious calling and——"

Chester then understood, and thought John Elliott was what in his youth would have been called a 'white man' for thus revealing his own excursions beyond the line of diplomatic duty.

"I much appreciate what you are doing," he said, "and it goes without saying that I shall respect your confidence absolutely."

"The lady I speak of is known as Mademoiselle Justine. I do not know her surname. She works—I mean she lives—in the rue de Penthièvre." And he gave Chester the number.

Chester felt a tingling of excitement. He was on to a scent, and the unusual prospect of playing the hunter in aid of his friend lent a new zest to life.

"May I say that you sent me?" he asked.

John Elliott leant back in his chair and half closed his eyes as if he were exhausted.

"Oh, yes," he replied, "by all means." Then he sat up alert and tense. "I sincerely hope you succeed, Chester. I have been in little short of a suppressed rage since I knew the details of Peter Melville's story. Diplomat as I am, it fills me with loathing and contempt to think that here, in the twentieth century, such petty and outrageous arrogance can not only operate to ruin Peter's private life, but be brought successfully to bear on his official career by having him removed from Austria. I think our State Department should have made a firm stand against such underhand pressure."

He paused. "I am afraid I have said rather more than I should. You must both forgive me and keep what I have said to yourself. I was, of course, speaking as a private citizen."

"My dear fellow," said Chester, "I understand perfectly; and it is more than kind of you to do as much as you have. But you and I are, I imagine, Peter's best friends and we are both acting for the best as we see it."

He took out his cigar case, offered a Hoyo to Elliott and then extracted one for himself. Both men lit up in silence and the small clouds of blue smoke rose luminous in the sunlight which came steaming through the tall windows.

"You know," said Chester, "I could not quite gauge the seriousness of Peter's plight at first. I'm afraid I have never been overwhelmed like that by a woman. Attracted, of course; a thousand times. Captivated, yes; a dozen times. Succumbed—with reservations—often enough, and not generally ashamed of it. But enthralled, bewitched and enslaved? Never. I hope also never to be. I find it quite frightening to behold, and almost sympathise with my man Mason, who prefers to keep all women at a safe distance rather than become entrapped!"

"I think most of what you say goes for me too. It is hard for anyone outside the magic circle to imagine what it is like to step over the line."

"But let me bother you a little more," went on

Chester. "Can you fill in the background and tell me something about the Count and his ways? From what Peter said, you have often met him and know how he stands."

Elliott stretched out his long legs and threw back his head.

"Oh, indeed, yes. I know the brute well enough. Anyone stationed in Austria comes to know all about him sooner or later. His name you know—Count Friedrich von Laufenthal. He is a man in his fifties; tall, thin, aquiline, with a high domed forehead and thick grey hair. His eyes are a watery blue, and he combines an undoubtedly aristocratic air—an *arrogantly* aristocratic air—with a certain sly look which I think is due to his rather close-set eyes. He is an extremely shrewd man, and now a fabulously rich and powerful one. His family had a fair amount of land, but he has added vast estates to the old properties. His large castle—he had two in the Tyrol—is Schloss Ansbach, just south of Innsbruck. The other one is Schloss Terfen, about twelve miles from Innsbruck on the northern side of the valley on the way to Jenbach. But he told that after the famous Laufenthal suicide pact."

"Suicide pact? I never heard of it."

"Well, you remember all about the much more famous Mayerling affair—Rudolf and Baroness Vetsera? Well, it was the same sort of thing on a smaller scale, so to speak: but no one knows much about it even now; and it happened way back in 1898. Von Laufenthal's

son, Johannes, a fine-looking boy of about twenty or so, judging from his photographs, got himself involved with a young married woman named (if I remember rightly) Frau Rechtlin, who was the wife of a Viennese manufacturer, and apparently some years his senior. All that is known, outside the family circle, is that they were found together, shot, in Schloss Terfen. There was no secret about the actual tragedy: but what led up to it, what the lady's husband thought of it, what in fact anyone thought of it, is a close family secret, if indeed they know much either. The only other thing that happened, obviously in connection with the affair, was the sudden death of Countess von Laufenthal immediately afterwards. Reliable rumour had it that she was a saintly woman who was ill-treated by the Count, and who naturally adored the boy, and that she died of the shock."

"What an extraordinary story; but where does Peter's lady fit in?"

"Gabriele seems to have been almost an afterthought. She was about ten years younger than Johannes. She would be about eighteen or nineteen now, I suppose; and she has been preserved in cotton-wool ever since, ready for a husband of her father's choosing."

"That is now von Stauffel, isn't it?"

Elliott nodded. "The Count himself seems to have been hit hard by his son's death, from all accounts, and disappeared from society for a year or so. But he was far from inactive on his own behalf. He expanded his

possessions and was soon adding land on a large scale; land which now includes the ownership of a number of factories as well. His chief properties are in the Tyrol; in Vienna—the Palais Laufenthal in the Himmelfortgasse is a magnificent place; and in Styria, where there is pasture and forest land and heaven knows what all. He also makes many deals on the Stock Exchange; and his reputation, both there and in regard to his land deals, is none too savoury. The same goes for his reputation with women, which is formidable. He manages to keep his *affaires* well under cover; though mostly, I think, because he chooses his partners from the lower-middle or professional classes who do everything they can to avoid scandal, and who are also, shall we say, not averse to monetary rewards.”

“So that’s how it is. But does he never trip up?”

“He never seems to. His money and power give him a wide margin of error, of course; although undoubtedly things must go wrong for him at times. On one of the rare occasions when his name became associated with a woman in society, it was rumoured she was turning sour on him and, as they say, had something on him. But suddenly the lady was not seen about Vienna and only last year I heard of her living in Rome. He certainly covers his tracks well enough. I don’t know where honesty in business starts or leaves off, but I doubt whether the Count commits technically dishonest acts. But I’m quite certain he would if they would pay him enough. But no one seems ever to know

what he is doing. What we *do* know, and know to our cost, is the man's power, both on the surface—openly—and underground. He is a creature to reckon with, is our noble Count. Now, again, it is seen only too bitterly well by the pressure he has been able to exert on our people to have Peter removed from Austria."

"Well, well," remarked Chester, "he certainly seems to be a formidable sort of fellow. But all the same, I am more determined than ever to fix him. Like you, it is Peter's affair first and then the attitude to the States that riles me. Somewhere, somehow, I shall get my way. My only doubt is about Gabriele. If she hasn't enough spunk to get up and leave the ogre to marry Peter, I wonder how long I shall have in order to complete operations before she cools off."

"No, Chester, I think you do her an injustice there. I have lived in that atmosphere and I know just how these things can happen. It is very hard for us Americans to understand. But a girl brought up in that habit of complete obedience is, as it were, chained to her parents, by invisible links. She may break her heart—and believe me, Gabriele is only one of hundreds—but she will still obey her father."

"I suppose that's how it is; Peter told me, and I am afraid I was annoyed at first. I think I am beginning to understand a little, although my whole spirit revolts against the idea. It's all so damned absurd, Elliott."

"I know, my dear fellow, I know. Such a girl knows perfectly well she is physically able to run away; but she

also knows such an act of direct disobedience would go on living inside her mind for ever, and poison even her happiest hours. All that, of course, says nothing of the fact that the Count would have Peter out of the Foreign Service in the twinkling of an eye; and any girl of sense knows that to ruin a man's career—no matter how willing he is at the time to have it ruined—is going to provide another poison pocket for the future. No, I think it is fantastic and deplorable; but unless you can get the Count to voluntarily release her, and so allay all feelings of guilt in her mind, you will fail in your mission for Peter. So good luck to you, and if I can help any more you know where to find me." He rose and held out his hand. Chester shook hands and thanked him with genuine feeling.

As he followed the footman down the great red-carpeted stairway he thought it was not every rising young diplomat who would have gone so far with a stranger, even to help rescue an intimate friend. Chester made a mental note to sing John Elliott's praises—without specifying the reasons—when he next met a senior member of the State Department.

As he stood on the broad steps of the Embassy, he drew the sharp spring air into his lungs and braced himself for action. His railway porter was right. The rain clouds had been removed from Paris in the night and the city was basking in sunshine. He felt exhilarated. Perhaps, he thought, he should have been a boxer or a soldier, if this was how he felt at the prospect.

of combat; and combat he knew it was going to be. A good cause, a tough opponent and ample resources on both sides: what more could he desire on this wonderful day? A small voice did whisper that he should be demonstrating the Chester 'Steamers' to rich prospective clients; and this he honestly intended to do. But friendship—and his new-found ambition to conquer the Count—must after all come first once in a while. And with these thoughts in his mind he walked back to the hotel with a firm step, a swinging cane, and a light in his eyes for every good-looking woman he met. It gave him considerable satisfaction—I must not become too smug, he said to himself—when the challenge of his glance was taken up and flashingly flung back by more than a few of the ladies thus optically accosted.

As he entered the Ritz he was suddenly reminded, by a more than come-hither look directed at him from the sidewalk, that he was soon to be in search of a Mademoiselle Justine, and that this Justine was the inmate of a house of ill-fame. He was not very happy about that; but if the information he needed was to be had from the devil himself, he told himself dramatically, he would brave it.

IV

Mademoiselle Justine Entertains

IT was not until after breakfast next morning, and during a stroll with Julius in the Tuileries Gardens, that Chester allowed himself to think seriously of his visit to Mademoiselle Justine. At what time, he wondered, did one visit a brothel? He had never considered the matter, although he had grown up to hear a monotonous series of so-called adventures from many of his friends, and to accept their experiences as part of the opulent scheme of things to which he was born. Even now, in his early thirties, the prospect of even an innocent visit filled him with a vague sense of discomfort, and effectively spoilt this second spring day in the Paris sunshine. But the elation and determination of yesterday still possessed him, and while contemplating the blaze of the geranium beds he decided that early evening would probably be the best time for his visit to the rue de Penthièvre—before what he took to be the rush of trade.

He decided to occupy himself with his family business for the rest of the morning, and a visit to the famous aeronaut, Santos-Dumont, in the afternoon. But everything proceeded to go wrong. The Chester agent was away sick; and on making enquiries about Santos,

he learnt that the Brazilian pioneer was away at Monte Carlo. So Chester spent the morning and early afternoon in an ancient fiacre—with Julius—touring those sights of Paris which could be viewed without stepping from the vehicle, except for lunch at Voisin's. Chester, having taken a liking to his driver, paid the man handsomely to call for him after the meal. Then the time was passed in a leisurely drive; so that by late afternoon he had stopped to see a variety of old favourites, the gesticulating group of the Marseillaise on the Arc de Triomphe, the Eiffel Tower—round which he had once seen Santos pilot his frail motorised gas-bag—and the Sacré-Cœur, with its swelling lemon-shaped domes soaring white and clean into the cloudless sky.

But the place he enjoyed and remembered most affectionately that day, or rather during that tour, was the dreamy little Place du Tertre, in Montmartre, where after urgent signals from Julius they stopped for nearly a quarter of an hour. They were peaceful minutes during which the driver drank a 'demi' at the little bistro with its wicker chairs and red umbrellas; Julius explored the slender tree trunks; and Chester lay back in the fiacre and gazed up happily at the tracery of young leaves against the blue sky, forgetting for a brief interval what had brought him to Paris. One day, he thought idly, he would go to the Louvre to see the Mona Lisa; he must be the only American who had never seen her. But as he had already visited Paris for five years running,

he decided he could now wait until Stella took him. She knew all about such things and could tell him what to look at, and also why he must see Mona Lisa. Thinking of Stella put him in mind of Mrs. Drummond; and as Julius jumped nimbly into the carriage and on to the seat, Chester felt more and more that Stella must be consulted. But it would have to be a letter for the present. When the cabby had finished his drink and taken his place on the box, the journey to the Place Vendôme got under way with a certain zest.

During the drive back to the Ritz, Chester had decided on six o'clock as the hour for his sortie to the 'establishment'. So shortly after half-past five, fortified by a glass of cognac, he set off on foot from the hotel, dressed as if for a formal visit to a London tea-party. Julius pranced ahead, his black woolly ears liting with the motion, and drew admiring remarks from the other pedestrians. The route led along the rue du Faubourg, past the British Embassy, as far as the Place Beauve; then to the right up the rue Miromesnil and so into the rue de Penthièvre.

After a little difficulty in finding the number, the house, struck Chester as a most respectable-looking building and resembling any of hundreds of private mansions of modest size to be found in Paris. The only slight point of difference was in the windows, all of which were shuttered.

As Chester surveyed the place, he was aware of Julius continuing on down the pavement, and whistled him,

back. Then a sudden panic swept over Chester. He had never considered if Julius could properly be brought to such a house; he had set forth from the hotel without giving the matter a thought. Now he wondered if he would be making a fool of himself and get turned away. Well, he thought; it's too late for regrets now: we must go ahead as if nothing were out of the ordinary.

"Come to heel, Julius," he called.

Chester, uncomfortable but resolute, mounted the steps and pushed the bell, which he noticed was electric. Almost before he withdrew his finger, the door was opened by a pertly serious maid dressed in sheeny black. Without a word she gestured the visitors in—with only the slightest flicker of a glance at Julius—shut the door behind them, and took Chester's hat and cane. She led the way across a deeply-carpeted hall to one of what appeared to be a number of small waiting-rooms. Chester breathed more freely. They must be used to dogs here. He looked around him. This was not how he had imagined an 'establishment'. The place was oppressively respectable; or did it perhaps remind him of a flashy New York restaurant? No, he had it now: it was like a poor imitation of Canfield's famous gambling-place on East Forty-fourth Street. It smelled of mixed and rather stale scent; mirrors covered the walls; and the chairs were upholstered in orange plush. The only hint of seduction was a syrupy-looking statuette, on a Corinthian pedestal, of a robustly curved female wearing nothing but a swan-bill

corset. As he bent to examine the finer points of this come-hither lady, Julius gave voice to his usual sign of dislike—two short barks—and Chester looked down at him and smiled. But Julius was not barking at any bronze lady. Chester turned round.

"I'm sorry, madame," he said, "I did not hear you enter."

She was a formidable-looking woman with a face like a Roman emperor and a large figure tightly encased in a plum-coloured creation of watered silk. Her eyelids were heavy and the lashes were thick with mascara.

"Bonsoir, monsieur," she said, her hands tightly clasped in front of her, and her eyes making a swift survey of appraisal. Chester watched with amusement as the glance slid easily from his face to his diamond tie-pin, and thence to the ring on his hand; finally to Julius, who had meanwhile sat down.

Chester sensed that money was telling in favour of no comment upon Julius. He returned the 'good evening', but before he could make his request she spoke again, a hard smile at the corner of her mouth:

"Vous voulez voir les petites dames, monsieur?"

Chester replied in his fluent but oddly-pronounced French that he wished to see not 'les dames', but a particular lady named Mademoiselle Justine whom he wished to interview on private business. Madame smiled again. "Naturally, monsieur, our discretion is absolute—but the little Justine is, I regret to say, not at home for the moment. But other young ladies are.

here who would be honoured to be entertained by monsieur."

"But it is particularly Mademoiselle Justine that I desired to speak with, madame." Chester thought he saw the rouged mouth make the slightest grimace at the word 'speak'. "Could I," he continued, "wait until Mademoiselle Justine returns—er—home?" He hoped that this euphemism was in keeping with the delicate idiom of the place.

"But, of course, monsieur; we should be enchanted. But this is no place for our distinguished guests to wait," and with that she turned and, with a slight bow, led the way through the door. It was then that Chester had second thoughts about taking Julius any farther.

"My dog, madame—could he wait here?" asked Chester.

The woman stopped, and turned her head again.

"But certainly, monsieur." Then she called in a sharp voice, almost like a bark: "Estelle, le chien!"

Chester bent down to Julius, patted him on the head and then handed him over to Estelle who had appeared in the hall. "He will not give any trouble, mademoiselle. He is very well behaved," he added, smiling at her.

With Julius safely in Estelle's care—on the end of a short lead—and only the whites of his eyes and pink tongue standing out against her black dress, Chester accompanied Madame up the great sweeping flight of stairs. As his feet sank into the carpet and his eyes swept over this new scene, he was amazed at the size

and gaudy magnificence of the place, with its gilt stucco, orange carpet and mirrored walls; and, at the top, an elaborate entrance to what appeared to be a ballroom. The façade of the house had been deceptive, thought Chester: this was quite some establishment; and he caught himself considering it in terms of overheads and running expenses and profits.

But as Madame stood aside on the landing and motioned him into the ballroom he was confronted by a sight that came near to un-nerving him. For there, ranged before him in a semicircle on the polished floor, were twenty-four women—he found himself counting them—of every size and shape, and even colour. Each was negligently—very negligently—clothed, in a peignoir, and each face wore a coy professional smile.

But Chester's embarrassment lasted only for a moment. It was all so unlike what he had imagined; he found the reality was so much more easy to deal with than the fantasy, that he suddenly became quite light-hearted. Almost without thinking, he found himself following Madame along the line of 'petites dames', many of them far from 'petite', as if he were a foreign potentate reviewing a somewhat exotic guard of honour. The thought made him smile, which came near to wrecking his expedition. Madame evidently thought he had met a sympathetic partner, and turned to introduce her:

"Mademoiselle Elfie," she said.

Not knowing the form on such occasions, Chester held out his hand to shake the girl's; but before she could respond, two short barks were heard outside on the staircase, then two more.

Chester realised that Estelle must have upset Julius in some way, and the dog had pulled away from her. A moment later Julius bounded into sight from the landing; but he did not expect the soft carpet of the stairway to give way suddenly to a smooth parquet floor. He slipped, half recovered, and then came sliding towards the astonished company sitting helplessly on his curly hindquarters, his trousered back legs thrust out before him. Even Madame smiled more naturally, and the women broke into peals of laughter as Julius slid to a stop in front of them. At first he sat there, his head on one side, an expression of bewilderment on his moustachioed black face. Then he rolled his eyes and grinned, got up and trotted over to Chester with his tail wagging.

Unseen by Chester, Estelle had also appeared, looking both amused and embarrassed, and was whispering to Madame. Madame beckoned Chester away from the unwanted Elfie.

"Mademoiselle Justine has returned," she said, and without a word led the way towards a tall gilt-and-white door which Estelle hastened to open in time for the party to pass through, Julius bringing up the rear with a tattoo of paws on the resounding floor.

He followed Madame down a deeply-carpeted and

mirrored corridor, before stopping in front of another gilt door.

"Would monsieur prefer our Egyptian room; or the Greek; or perhaps the Pompadour?"

Chester had no idea what this meant, and felt that his conversation with Mademoiselle Justine could as well be carried on in an Egyptian room as in any other. Madame inclined her head when he said so, and opened the door for him to enter.

"This is the Egyptian room, monsieur," and seeing Chester hesitate and look around him, added:

"Perhaps monsieur would see to the account?"

Chester realised that he would have to pay 'pour tout', but he had no idea what fee was expected. So he hastily thrust a thousand-franc note into her hand and said "Merci, madame." This seemed to give satisfaction, and he found himself alone in the room, with Julius at his heels, gazing with astonishment at the frieze of life-size Egyptian figures proceeding stiffly round the walls; at the red carpet, the completely mirrored ceiling and the great bed with its black silk sheets and pillows. It was also very hot, and a heavy scent hung in the still air.

There was a knock on the door and Estelle entered with a tray bearing two glasses and a bottle of champagne. She placed it on a side table—supported on two golden seated cats—and withdrew without a word. As Chester was approving the efficiency of this service his eye caught a door in the far corner of the room: it was.

ajar. He went over and opened it, to find beyond a small dressing-room; the most noticeable feature of which was a single fresco which, even in his new complacency, succeeded in somewhat embarrassing him. He stepped out backwards and closed the door, only to be confronted by a sight which, for the first time that day, made him blush. For there, bending down to stroke Julius, was a naked woman; naked, that is, except for red silk stockings with frilled black garters and high-heeled red shoes.

"Oh, excuse me," said Chester without thinking, and wondering through what hidden doorway she had so silently entered. He then realised this must be Mademoiselle Justine. "I mean," he went on, "I didn't expect you so soon, or rather——" He stopped. He was hastily adjusting his imagination which had for some reason assumed the 'petite dame' he sought to be indeed 'petite', and rather helpless. His hostess looked, in fact, like a full-sized replica of the corseted bronze lady downstairs.

The woman straightened and smiled at him, without affectation and without—to Chester's momentary surprise—any embarrassment. "What a sweet dog, monsieur, but is he not large for a poodle?"

This technical gambit also took Chester by surprise, but it gave him time to recover. "Oh, no," he said, "you are thinking of toy poodles. This is a proper one." He paused. "You are Mademoiselle Justine?"

"Yes; Madame says you asked for me by name. That

was kind of monsieur; but I do not remember you."

Chester was too fastidious to be more than superficially attracted by so much nudity, however dramatically set off by its crimson accoutrements and Egyptian background. He wished she would put some clothes on.

"Mademoiselle," he said, "I am here to ask an unusual favour of you—no, not——" He hesitated. "It is information I want to ask you for——"

"Information, monsieur? Do I then not please you?"

"Oh, dear," said Chester out loud, without intending it, "no, no; I did not mean that at all. But I am trying to help a friend—you understand?—and I was told that you might be able to assist me, and hence my friend. Mademoiselle, I am very worried. When I feel—when I have found out what I want—then I shall come back here to visit you with the greatest of pleasure. But just now, it is very important for me to know something and—I hope you will not mind my saying—my friend and I do not expect such information to be given free." He profoundly hoped he had not sounded insulting.

During this long and halting speech she had moved languidly to the bed and sat down. Then with slow deliberation, she lay back against the pillows and stretched herself like a lazy cat.

"And what is it that you wish to know about?" She was looking up at the mirrored ceiling, and watching him in it.

"It concerns a certain Count von Lausenthal."

At this name she jerked up her head and stared at him,

her whole body rigid. She looks positively venomous, thought Chester.

"Are you a friend of his?" she almost snarled.

"Good heavens, no, mademoiselle! In fact it was to find out something to his discredit that I came to appeal for your help."

"Ah," she said, breathing the word into a long drawn out sigh, and leaning her head back again: "that is different, very different. Please tell me about your young friend, and how you want to help him."

"Well, mademoiselle, this, you will understand, is in the strictest confidence, of course; but Count von Laufenthal has a daughter whom my friend wishes to marry; he is desperately in love with her, and she with him. And the Count will not allow it. My friend, like myself, is an American and the Count ~~hates~~ all foreigners, especially Americans. Naturally, I will do anything in my power to help my friend; and a certain gentleman in Paris told me that you might know the details of some scandal which, if put about in Vienna, would profoundly embarrass the Count. It related, I understand, to a man whom the Count ruined and who is kept silent by some family hold the Count has on him." Chester paused. She said nothing.

"What I felt," he continued, "was that if I knew the details of the affair, I could, shall we say, bring pressure to bear on the Count; would, in fact, tell him that those details would become known if he persisted in his callous refusal to allow his daughter to marry my friend."

"I see, I see; so that is why monsieur wants this information. Perhaps I can help you. If it had been only a few months ago I could not have said a word, because the man's son was alive. The Count swore that if I ever breathed a word of what I knew he would find means of ruining the son, as he had the father. He knew I loved that boy, and he had the power to carry out such a threat. But Joseph is now dead. Yes, I know the details. I will tell you the details." She paused. "I expect it was my friend John Elliott who advised you to come to me?" Chester nodded.

And lying there at her ease, sipping the champagne which Chester poured into her glass from time to time, she told him of the days when she had been the Count's mistress, and of how she accidentally discovered that he had ruined a certain Herr Loder. This man had been cheated of valuable property in Styria, where the Count had large estates, and then by further dishonest dealings on the Stock Exchange his ruin had been completed.

"And why did the Count so pursue this unhappy man?" said Chester.

"First, because he badly needed the land, and then because he badly needed his daughter. By devilry which I will not describe, he achieved both."

"My gracious," said Chester, "what a dreadful story!"

"It was a dreadful story," she said, "it still is a dreadful story. You see, monsieur, I am the daughter."

"You—the daughter!"

"Yes. My brother died only recently and my father

never knew all the details of his downfall until I told him after my brother's funeral. I dared not tell him before because of the threat to Joseph. But father is too broken to do anything, and the Count is very powerful. In any case, no one would pay any attention to my father; and it would also take much money to investigate and prove the various transactions, although I have the information on which it could be based."

There was silence in the Egyptian room. Chester, sitting uncomfortably in an elaborate chair which must have been copied from a Pharaoh's throne, found himself looking at the luxuriant reflection of his companion in the ceiling, and listening absently to Julius who was asleep on the floor and breathing stertorously.

"I will write down more details for you, and send them to your hotel," she said at last. "I will also give you an accommodation address to reach me if you want anything further." She paused. "I hope your friend gets his girl; but I am afraid I hope even more that the bankers and merchants of Vienna will hear the story of my father; and that that devil is made to pay him back."

Mademoiselle Justine sighed, then suddenly shook her head, as if to clear it of the melancholy story. She was once more the solicitous inmate of the establishment.

"Before you go, monsieur, shall I not entertain you?" she asked. "It is, after all, what I am here for."

"It is most kind of mademoiselle," he started, but——. He rose awkwardly, annoyed with himself

for his embarrassment, and took a step towards the bed. Before he realised what he was doing, he had put out his hand, and then hastily withdrawn it at seeing her eyebrows rise and a slight smile form at one corner of her mouth. How in tarnation, he thought to himself, do I get out of this place—polite but quick?

He turned away and as he fumbled in an inside pocket for his wallet, said:

"I would be most grateful if you would send the details you promised to my hotel—the Ritz. Here is my card."

He turned towards her and saw with gratitude her hand rising to take it. He thrust into it the card and a large banknote, murmuring almost inaudibly: "I hope you will accept this with my deep gratitude."

Her smile was now more gentle, almost compassionate, and he was conscious of her eyes watching him as he called Julius and made for the door. With his hand on the knob, he glanced back at her. Mademoiselle Justine was tucking the money into a little pocket attached to one of her elaborate black garters. She met his glance, still smiling:

"Adieu, Monsieur Chester," she said, "I wish you and your young friend good fortune."

Chester quietly closed the door on the unnatural art of Egypt, on the white flesh and vivid red stockings of Mademoiselle Justine, to see Estelle hovering expectantly but discreetly at the end of the corridor. How, he wondered, did she arrange to be at the right

place at the right time? Perhaps there was a whole squad of Estelles. She led him through yet another passage, out on to the main landing, and down the sweeping staircase to the hall. They met nobody on the way. At the door Chester received his hat and cane in exchange for another note, and with a "Merci, monsieur," and a decorous little bob, Estelle saw the visitors out into the evening sunshine. Two pigeons were wheeling above the steep roof-tops, their wings flashing in the golden light.

Flashlight in Mayfair

IT was an ebullient Chester who stepped down from the Dover boat train at Charing Cross, to be met by an apprehensive Peter Melville and a gloomy Mason. After the greetings were over, the three men and Julius piled into a growler and set off on the short journey to the Carlton Hotel. As if to match his mood, the weather had smiled on Chester during every minute of his journey back from Paris, and now the evening was about to close in on London. A splendid crimson cloak spread over the city and tinged Nelson's column and the buildings around Trafalgar Square with a ghostly pink.

Mason remained silent during the ride, but the other two talked unceasingly until interrupted by the impressive head of William—the Carlton Commisionaire—which suddenly bent into the window of the cab and said: "Good evening, gentlemen!" At which Julius started to bark, and the two friends realised they were 'home'.

They left Mason to take care of the light luggage and look after Julius, and went straight to the comfort of the hotel bar, where Ted the barman greeted Chester with a broad smile and the question:

"Your usual H.P.W., Mr. Chester?"

"You old son of a gun," laughed Chester, "who taught you how to make it?"

"Ah, sir, trade secret, sir; but I couldn't have you asking for cocktails we didn't know about. Seems a fine drink too. I've tried it out on a few of our customers, and all but one were full of praise for it."

"Who was the one?" asked Chester as he watched the man shake up the drinks.

"Old Sir Edmund; he thought it tasted like—well, it was 'rot-gut' he said, sir. He doesn't approve of your Yankee drinks."

It appeared that Sir Edmund was a somewhat apoplectic cavalryman who made the Carlton bar his second home, and Chester did not wonder at his disapproval.

They took their cocktails to the far corner of the room and sat back on the banquette of soft crimson plush.

"By the way, Peter, what was wrong with Mason? He looked miserable all the way back from the station and I was just about to quip him when I thought better of it. I didn't want to embarrass him in front of you."

"I'm not sure; but he was clutching a paper and muttering something about a balloon accident when we met. I did not pay much attention, I'm afraid, in my present state."

"A balloon accident? Oh, lord, I hope to goodness it is none of the Aero Club members." And he strode over

to the bar, forgetful for the minute even of Melville's troubles.

"Ted, what's in the news about a balloon accident? Have you got today's paper? I've not seen one."

Ted reached under the counter.

"Oh, yes, sir, terrible tale," he said coming up with the *Daily Mail* and opening it out on the bar. "It's the 'Thrasher', sir, an army balloon. Hadn't been heard of since Tuesday, when she went up from Farnborough. Ah, here it is."

He turned the paper round for Chester to read, and went to serve another customer.

Chester read the news with a sinking heart.

Any tragedy in his favourite sport always upset him, and he took it as a personal loss. It was just the same with poor Mason: no wonder he had been gloomed by the accident. Luckily ballooning accidents were rare. But the 'Thrasher', with two young Engineer lieutenants on board had completely disappeared; that is to say, until yesterday, when a Brixham fishing smack found the envelope and basket—but no crew—floating in the sea off the Devon coast.

"Poor fellows," muttered Chester to himself, "how on earth did it happen? Surely to goodness they could have brought her down and ripped her when they saw the coast ahead of them. I wonder if she burst." He looked at the portraits of the two men—Lieutenant Caulfield and Lieutenant Martin-Locke—and tried to remember if he had met them. Deciding he had not,

and then realising his neglect of Melville, he turned and went back to his friend. But all the zest was taken out of his account of the Paris expedition. The 'Thrasher'—silly name for a balloon, he found himself thinking—almost seemed a kind of omen. Would his fine scheme about the Count, now inflated and airborne, be suddenly punctured and fall to the ground? He must not be so superstitious. After all, ballooning accidents do happen, just once in a while.

But Melville now seemed buoyed up with hope as Chester detailed first his visit to John Elliott and then to the establishment in the rue de Penthièvre. He played down the somewhat humorous preliminaries, in deference to Melville's feelings, and found himself making more of a drama of Mademoiselle Justine's tale than he had intended.

Melville laid his hand on Chester's knee:

"I can't tell you how grateful I am," he said. "I am not going to encourage any false hopes in myself; but this certainly sounds promising ground if you feel you can pursue it." •

"Pursue it? I should darned well say I shall pursue it; my dander is well and truly up where that damned Count is concerned, I can tell you, Peter. I'm after him from now on. You just leave it to Howard L. Chester."

Next day the gloom was dispelled for both Chester and Mason. A telegram had been relayed to the hotel from Thomas, the Chester agent in London, saying that

the new 'Steamer' had been landed safely at Southampton and could be picked up as soon as the port formalities had been complied with. Both men felt like school-boys.

"Down we go to Southampton this very evening," cried Chester. "Get the porter here to reserve rooms in the city for tonight, and collect Thomas from his office straight away. Tell him I'm sorry to be such a nuisance but he really must drop everything overboard and come with us. His signature has to be on the papers down there at the docks. Perhaps the 'Thrasher' wasn't a bad omen for us after all," he concluded.

And off went Mason to summon the Chester agent.

All was soon ready for their departure and Julius had been handed over to the assistant manager for safe keeping. Chester was last down, and once out of the lift he strode across the lobby. But he was pursued by the voice of the hall porter, and stopped—his expression a grimace of impatience.

"Mr. Chester, sir, there's a letter just come for you—special delivery by District Messenger."

Chester walked quickly back to the desk. He took one look at the envelope and the bold feminine handwriting, recognised the author as Mrs. Drummond, and told the man to keep it till he returned. "No woman shall come between me and my 'Steamer' tonight," he said to himself, "least of all La Drummond—drat her eyes." And he made for the swing door in the Haymarket, through which he could see Mason

and the Chester agent standing waiting beside a growler.

As they wheeled along to Waterloo, Chester was making up a little doggerel and mouthing it to himself:

If I'm summoned
By Frau Drummond,
Tell her I'm in bed:
If she's sceptic
Or dyspeptic,
Simply say I'm dead.

The journey down to Southampton was passed in a state of suppressed excitement for both Chester and Mason, who felt as if they were going to meet a favourite member of the family. But they knew that the subject of steam-cars was of little interest to their worthy agent, who was a wholehearted railroad man with a certain contempt for motor-cars in general. He had to appear in person at the docks to claim the 'Steamer', otherwise he would have been excused what must have been a tiresome trip for him. So Chester made a special effort to talk about the state of the locomotive business—about which he took great pains to be well informed—until the distant view of masts and funnel-tops was visible above the roofs of Southampton. Chester leant out of the carriage window and sniffed the air, only to get a smut in his eye and withdraw hurriedly.

That's what I get for talking amiably about locomotives, he thought, pulling out his handkerchief;

one of the tribe goes and throws cinders at me. But a minute later he and Mason were deep in talk of steam-cars and discussing the finer points which made the Chester superior, in their view, to all other 'Steamers', to say nothing of petrol automobiles.

It was no use trying to see the car that evening, so they took a brisk walk to the dock gates to enquire exactly where they should go next morning, and returned to the Dolphin Hotel for an early night.

Next day the party was up and about early, and they were down at the docks by eight o'clock watching Thomas filling out forms and signing declarations. After what Chester found exasperating delays they were led along a dock amidst coiling ropes and the refuse of many cargoes, to where a merchantman of moderate size with a single bright yellow funnel was tied up.

On the dockside lay an enormous wooden case bearing the stencilled words 'Chester Mfg. Co.' all over it. A team of stevedores had been assembled after judicious palm-greasing by the experienced Thomas, and then Chester had to stand a quarter of an hour of banging and prising and pushing and pulling. At last the 'Silver Steamer' emerged like a brand new butterfly from its wooden chrysalis and stood brilliant and shining in the early morning sun.

Chester stood back to gaze at her, then walked all round the new car noting every smallest detail. He ran his hands over the smooth silver surfaces of the bonnet and coachwork.

In appearance the 'Silver Steamer' had a certain resemblance to the Rolls-Royce, but the steam-car had what most people would call a Renault type bonnet. The curve from the windscreen down to the front, and over to the great headlamps, was longer and gentler than the famous French petrol cars. The coachwork, like the Rolls-Royce's, was slightly tiered, and a collapsible hood was housed at the back.

The thorough, ever prepared and thoughtful Mason had brought a can of distilled water and emptied it into the boiler pipe, as well as a small quantity of paraffin for the burners. This would be sufficient for the short trip to the hotel. Chester then climbed into the driver's seat while Mason struck a match and lit a small pencil-like torch, which he thrust into a tube beneath the bonnet. A faint hissing sound was all that could be heard. In less than two minutes Chester announced that she had steam up, and the others went aboard.

A group of dockers had gathered round to watch the flashing equipage start off.

As Chester checked the controls a large cheery-looking stevedore laughed to his mate:

"Can't get the blamed thing to start—you'll see; there's something wrong with the ruddy engine. Always tell with these here motor-cars; if they don't start up sudden-like with a roar, and keep on roarin', there's som'art wrong."

And as he uttered that last word the 'Steamer' started

moving forward without a sound and slid smoothly away from the astonished group of men.

"Cor' lumme, I can't believe it! Do you hear, Bert? or rather that's just it; you don't hear nothin'! It's real uncanny, it is! Suppose it's a new Yankee contraption with som'art to muffle the sound."

Chester drove back to the hotel and the 'Steamer' was soon the centre of another admiring crowd as she waited for the passengers—now white-coated and goggled—to pile their luggage on the rack and take their places, while Mason filled up the boiler and fuel tank. This time Chester put on a new act for the benefit of the onlookers. After warning them to stand away from the front of the car he opened the throttle quickly and the 'Steamer' fairly leapt away from the curb and accelerated up the street like a silent silver rocket.

"Oh, sir, what a car!" exclaimed Chester as he settled down to a comfortable cruising speed of thirty miles an hour on the London road.

"Mason, you take her over at Basingstoke—we'll stop at the Red Lion—and drive her the rest of the way."

"Yes, indeed, it'll be a pleasure, sir, a real pleasure; but wouldn't Mr. Thomas like to take a turn, sir?"

"No, thank you, Mason," answered the agent, "you know I'm a dyed-in-the-wool railroad man and have never driven one of these things in my life."

The journey up to London proved to Chester that the 'Silver Steamer' was all, and more, than he had hoped

of her. She even took the hills at speed without making a dash for them, as other steam-cars had to, and he felt proud that the vital improvement of keeping a sufficient head of steam was due to his own designs.

It both annoyed and amused him to have to use the horn so much, as the 'Steamer's' silent progress was apt to give a painful shock to pedestrians, horses, carriages and motor-cars as she overhauled them before they were aware of her presence.

It was a Chester near to bursting with pride who rounded Piccadilly Circus to the admiring glances of the crowds, and turned down the Haymarket for the final and triumphant quarter-mile. Perhaps the greatest reward to Chester was in the proprietary behaviour of the stalwart William who neglected his other duties on the pavement outside the Carlton to keep watch over the 'Steamer' until Mason came out to take her round to the garage.

Chester had been so engrossed in enjoying the new 'Steamer' that he had successfully dismissed from his mind all thoughts of Mrs. Drummond; and it was with a minor shock of annoyance that he now saw her letter on top of the pile awaiting him at the hotel desk.

As he rode up in the lift he idly sniffed the envelope to see if it was scented. It was; the scent was one of which he had delightful memories and he resented it in association with the importunate Mrs. Drummond. Once inside his room he tore open the offending envelope and plumped down in a deep arm-chair to

read what his persistent admirer had to say. The letter ran as follows:

"40A, Hertford Street,
"Mayfair.

"MY DEAR MR. CHESTER,

"I do not know if this note will catch you 'at home', but I can only pray it does. I know you will be irked by such a request, but I am in desperate need of advice on a very personal matter, and I know of no one I can turn to but you. No, it is not true that I know of *no one*; but no one whom I can trust as I know that I can trust you, even from our brief meetings. Do please believe me when I say that you may be the means of saving an innocent person from a gross injustice, or even worse. I shall be here between 9 and 11 o'clock to-night and to-morrow night.

"I shall have no right to complain if you do not come, but I shall have every reason to bless you if you do.

"Yours, in need,

"ISOBEL DRUMMOND."

Chester's heart sank. He objected strongly to such appeals; they suggested a kind of emotional blackmail which he despised. Yet in such cases one could never really tell if the woman was in trouble or not. If indeed she was, he would (he supposed) submit to the

implicit flattery of a beautiful woman telling him he was the only who who could save her.

"Oh, damn her," he silently sighed, "what an old game and how well it works, especially on Yankee suckers!" But he was puzzled. He had never trusted Mrs. Drummond from the moment he first saw her; and although this appeal might be genuine, it equally might not. If the latter, it was possibly a simple and crude device to seduce him. Well, he could take care of that all right, either by walking out, or—for that matter—by being seduced and still walking out. On the occasions he had allowed himself to be come-hithered he always found he could depart from the affair at any time—and without any regrets. Only when he himself had made the running did he become emotionally involved and pursue the relationship with relish.

He decided there was nothing to lose by going to Hertford Street to see what it was all about, although the whole business would be distasteful—even the possible seduction—and all he would have to show his conscience in return was a good deed. It was true, he also admitted to himself a certain curiosity about the request, and it might at any rate be instructive.

He looked at his watch and saw that it was only just after seven. So he scribbled a note to Mrs. Drummond saying he would be at her house at nine-thirty punctually—there was no harm in putting in a businesslike touch—and went down to the hotel lobby to have it taken by

hand straight away. Then he again banished Mrs. Drummond from his mind and spent an hour writing more pleasant and profitable letters before going into the grill-room for a quick dinner.

As the evening was still fine he decided to walk to Mayfair from the Carlton. So he strolled up the Haymarket—quiet now compared with the daily clamour of horses' hoofs and the iron rims of cart-wheels—and along Piccadilly until he came to the Ritz. As he was still early for his appointment he retired to the hotel bar and lounged there for twenty minutes drinking an excellent Cockburn '63 port and listening to the restrained babel of conversation around him.

The problem of Mrs. Drummond—now making him quite irritable—was not improved even by this mellowing interlude. On the stroke of the half-hour he stood beneath the discreet and seemingly protective glass porch of No. 40A, Hertford Street, and rang the bell.

The door was opened by a trim French maid—or at least a passable imitation of one—who was clearly expecting him, and welcomed him by name.

"Madame will receive you directly," she said, taking his hat and cane and laying them on a slender-legged side table. "Please to follow me, monsieur."

As she led the way up a deeply-carpeted stairway, Chester felt that the atmosphere of the place was like an exquisitely appointed spider's web, with every item he could see reflecting good taste and considerable cash outlay. The maid opened a cream-panelled door

without knocking, and showed him into the drawing-room. The word 'lush' was all he could think of applying to what he saw. There was a hot-house atmosphere about the place, and it even reminded him of the rue de Penthievre, except that now the feeling aroused was more personal and intimately alluring.

He noticed the sliding partition which could be thrown back to make one large chamber of the front and back rooms, and the door let into it for ordinary access, a door behind which he thought he could hear subdued voices and other, unidentifiable, sounds. He moved slowly round the room, examining the large davenport, the expensive-looking coloured prints of nymphs and lovers—which he took to be French—the gilt side tables, the ornaments, the flowers in Chinese vases and the chairs with their embroidered seats and backs. Yes, he thought, 'lush' is definitely the word for all this. He did not like it at all. He felt almost trapped amongst such feminine surroundings, and for a brief moment he even considered running down the soft stairway and bolting ignominiously from the house. He looked up at the closed curtains screening the windows, their heavy damask folds adding still more to the effect of imprisonment which was becoming more oppressive to him every minute.

Chester was fingering the brocaded fringe of one of the curtains when he heard the door open behind him, and turned round.

Mrs. Drummond stood before him in full evening

regalia. Against his will he found himself admiring the sight. She was dressed in orange taffeta, with the waist even more than fashionably pinched in, and the material fitting close to the hips as it curved down to the trailing skirt. Her chestnut hair was piled on her head in close-set waves. Fashion had decided that her bust be thrown forward, and she had decided that enough of it should emerge to provide an unnerving spectacle for Chester to gaze at. Chester, in fact, found himself momentarily hypnotised by the seductive spheres as they heaved and subsided amongst the frills which sprouted from the tightly encasing bodice.

By the time he forced his eyes away and raised them to Mrs. Drummond's, he was almost ready to take the evening's entertainment as he found it, without complaint. But the look in her eyes banished that idea on the instant. Here was danger, he realised, but it was too late to escape. For Mrs. Drummond—without uttering a word—flung herself at him. He was conscious of her arms around him in a veritable bear-hug, but was not completely wakened from his surprise until he felt her mouth pressing against his own. He started to struggle.

It was then that the flash came. A brilliant illumination exploded in the room with a loud 'phut', and at the same time there was a distinct metallic 'click'.

Chester wrenched his mouth free and instinctively turned his head. He found himself looking at a small

bald-headed man in a dark suit who clutched a large press camera in front of him with its magnesium flare-tray stuck high above on a stick.

This second apparition was so surprising that Chester ceased struggling. But as the realisation of what had happened began to develop in his mind he again went into action. His arms were still pinioned to his sides by Mrs. Drummond's; but instead of fighting free of these fetters, he only succeeded in 'overbalancing'. Both of them crashed to the floor and Chester now found himself sprawled beneath the scented bulk of his antagonist. He gave a sudden heaving twist of his body, and successfully flung Mrs. Drummond off his chest.

As he struggled to get up Chester was dimly aware of the photographer disappearing through the doorway; but he was so angry that his only thought was to attack the primary source of this outrage. He found himself on his knees glaring into the now terrified face of his hostess. As he lifted his hand to strike it she covered her face with her hands and rolled over to avoid the blow. A timid shout made Chester look up—hand poised in mid-air—to find the French maid staring at him in horror from the doorway. Her big eyes seemed fixed on his raised right hand, before moving to her prostrate mistress.

Chester followed the glance and found himself staring at the tightly encased prominence of Mrs. Drummond's 'derrière'. For a moment he paused, as if in doubt, then he brought down his hand with all the

force he could exert. The blow sounded like the crack of a pistol, and was greeted by a muffled scream from the victim and a high-pitched squeak from the maid.

Chester then leaped to his feet and made for the door, now thinking only of the photographer and the imperative need to stop him. But as he ran down the stairs with the fleeing maid stumbling down ahead of him, he realised the chase was hopeless and the man would already be out of the house and away. At the bottom of the stairway he pulled himself up and paused, panting and still furious, and suddenly conscious of the tingling in his right palm. The maid had disappeared down the basement stairway and Chester heard her shut her door and turn the key.

He seized his hat, opened the front door, went out and slammed it behind him, relieved beyond words at being in the fresh air. He found to his surprise that he was trembling, trembling with rage. He glanced up at the curtained windows and then started walking unsteadily into Down Street, where he had to stop. He leant against a wall and tried to pull himself together.

"Anything wrong, sir?" asked a deep friendly voice.

Chester looked up to find a large policeman standing beside him, arms akimbo, with his head on one side.

"Nothing much, officer," said Chester, acutely conscious of how stupid he must appear, and catching sight for the first time of the white powder all over his dark suit. He must look a sight, he thought.

"Haven't been feeling too well, and then a damned

streetwalker accosted me up the road and I nearly had to brain her to get rid of her. She hung on as if she were drowning."

He glanced at the policeman to see how this story—so near the truth—was going down. The policeman seemed to believe him.

"Ah, they're the devil incarnate, some of them," said the man; "saw just such a thing happen myself last Wednesday; almost under my nose it was. Actually got hold of the slut, but she wriggled free of me and was off like greased lightning." He paused. "Shall I get you a cab, sir?" he asked solicitously.

Chester felt he needed only one thing at that moment—a large glass of brandy. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the brightly-lit windows of the 'Mayfair' tavern a few yards away, on the corner of Brick Street.

"Officer," he said, "would you do me the favour of getting me a cab and asking him to wait outside the pub there. I must go in and have a pick-me-up." He took out his note-case, extracted a ten-shilling note and held it out to the officer.

"Give the cabby five," he said, "and give me the pleasure of standing you a drink when you go off duty—I know how strict you London bobbies are about not drinking on the job."

"Well, now, sir, that's real handsome of you, I'm sure. I will certainly do just that, and drink your very good health. I'm thinking I'll wait with the cabby and see you safely into the vehicle as you

might say. But first, sir, let's clean you down."

Wherewith he helped the embarrassed Chester to brush the powder off his suit and generally put him to rights. Then, a friendly hand under the American's arm, the policeman accompanied him the few steps to the public house and saw him safely into the saloon bar.

As he sipped his brandy he was surprised and quite alarmed at the disturbance he felt within himself at the whole sorry incident. It was quite outside his experience to have a woman whom he had automatically classed as a 'lady' play a trick upon him such as would grace the lowest type of New York harlot. But the handsome barmaid, the warm and friendly din of the bar, and the cheerful conversation that ebbed and flowed beside him, slowly helped to relax him. He began to analyse the events of the past half-hour with a cool mind and a clear judgment.

The first thing to dawn on him was a purely technical point. How could a man with a hand camera, and no assistant, manage to take a photograph by flashlight? Flashlight photography generally involved leaving the lens uncovered for a moment while he or an assistant set off the magnesium. That usual technique would make a scene in which he had been such an unwilling actor very difficult to take. Unless the fellow had invented some new dingus to synchronise the flash and the camera shutter. That was quite possible, he supposed; anyway, it was no good speculating. The best thing was to

assume the wretch had had good luck and secured his photograph. Always better to face the worst, his father used to say, and he was quite right.

Chester raised his eyes from his drink and encountered the barmaid. She smiled and he smiled back; he was feeling very much better. Then he remembered the patient policeman. He hastily grabbed his hat, said a sincere good-night to the barmaid, and pushed open the saloon door.

He found the policeman in placid conversation with the cabby, and he thanked them both for waiting.

"Feeling better now, sir?" asked the policeman, who did not wait for an answer but turned to the cabby and said: "Now, cabby, you look after this gentleman good and proper—he's had a nasty experience."

Chester thanked him and climbed into the hansom, calling up to the driver the one word "Carlton" as the policeman closed the doors for him.

As the hansom turned into Piccadilly with its gay jingle of bells Chester went over his 'nasty experience' once again. Was it amorous blackmail—seduction by blackmail—or was there something more serious behind it, big money for example? He wondered how he ever could have been led into such an obvious trap. No, that was not fair: he was probably not the only person who had been taken in by La Drummond. He went over the dinners and other functions at which he had met her. He would jolly well see to it that she was blackballed around Society. How on earth did the

wretched creature think she would get away with such a crude kind of blackmail? For blackmail of some kind it was obviously intended to be. It would not be long before a demanding letter arrived. Well, she should get a very athletic flea in her ear for her pains. And with that satisfying thought he was put down at the Carlton, considerably calmer than he had been at the start of the short journey home.

Of Mrs. Drummond, as a person, he thought little as he strode into the hotel lobby, stood restlessly in the ascending lift and entered his room. She was now simply a human menace to be punished and deprived of the power to make more mischief. Why she should have embarked on such a wild course did not interest him. She had offended against all he respected and expected in women. As far as he was concerned, she was an outcast.

Mason looked at his master with alarm and put down the technical handbook to the new 'Steamer' which he had been studying. Even Julius seemed to hold back from his usual greeting. Chester told Mason every detail of the affair and in so doing managed to piece together the exact sequence of events for the first time. Mason was shocked but not surprised.

"Women," he said darkly, "are often dangerous. You never know which are and which aren't until they strike, sir—like snakes," he added illogically.

"Mason," said Chester, "we shall start our trip round Europe immediately. Get everything set to go to-

morrow, and if necessary I will go across alone—I mean if you cannot get the 'Steamer' on board the Channel boat at such short notice. I will write a note to Mr. Melville now which you can take round tomorrow. Although I shall get a blackmailing letter of some kind tomorrow—I'm certain of that—she will be up a tree, just supposing there is a real photo, if I go abroad without settling something with her. Anyway, we'll see what she has to say and I will decide whether to write back immediately or delay. If she has a photograph and intends to use it in some disgraceful way, she certainly won't risk whatever prize she expects by taking action before she sees how I am going to treat the matter."

Despite his genuine determination to 'deal' with Isobel Drummond, he felt an unreasoning panic stealing over him—panic at being involved in something outside his experience. His instincts were twofold—to flee from a danger he did not understand, and to flee to the one person who would advise him sensibly in this wretched business. That person was Stella Barrington.

But as he fell asleep that night it was not of Stella or of Mrs. Drummond that Chester was thinking. It was of his Opera Season at Covent Garden, now to be lost entirely.

VI

Stella Barrington Gives Advice

CHESTER realised that he could not travel as fast across Europe as he would have wished, and his efforts on Melville's behalf—to say nothing of the irritation caused by Mrs. Drummond—must be modified by his duty to the 'Chester' firm. His London agent had received and passed to him the names of some twenty rich men on the Continent who had shown interest in the new 'Steamer'; and Chester would have to visit at least those in France and Switzerland before he saw Stella Barrington or went in search of the Count. He reckoned that something over a week would be involved with this first tour. Luckily a number of prospective buyers were in Paris, and could be dealt with quickly in surroundings he enjoyed.

So the party—Chester, Mason and Julius—journeyed first to Paris, driving from the docks at Calais after a somewhat blowy crossing which had frightened both Chester and Mason in case their precious car should be damaged in the hold of the cross-Channel packet.

On arrival in Paris, Chester paid a courtesy visit to John Elliot at the embassy to tell him of the plan of campaign; and then gave elaborate lunches, and drives in the 'Steamer', to four wealthy Parisians, three of whom

ordered the car and were full of its praises, and needed no encouragement in their desire to show off to their wealthy friends. It amused Chester to see that the greatly inflated price which he had insisted on quoting for the European market merely impressed the clients with its sense of exclusiveness, and was far from discouraging them.

Chester felt he had been lucky and successful in his first demonstrations on the Continent, and he set off in high spirits from the French capital with Mason beside him and Julius in his now favourite place on the back seat. This elevated and isolated position seemed to bring out the prima donna in the poodle—Chester looked forward to the seat being shared by both Stella and Julius later on—and he often provided one of his toothy grins for roadside spectators who seemed appreciative.

In this fashion the 'Silver Steamer' made its quiet and handsome progress through the French countryside, gliding down the long avenues of the 'routes nationales', scattering the chickens in the lonely villages, and everywhere leaving clouds of fine white dust in its wake. From time to time it would sweep up the drives of some elegant château and come to a standstill with a discreet crunch of gravel, to pay a decorous and profitable call on the owner.

At Besançon the ritual was somewhat picturesquely altered, as the mayor of that city was a personal friend of a wealthy manufacturer on Chester's list. This

resulted in the mayor—having informed the local press—being given a joy-ride out to a pretentious residence in the neighbourhood and being greeted on his return by gratifyingly large crowds along the streets. As the mayor rode beside Julius, it was not very clear to Chester which of his back-seat passengers was receiving the greater acclaim.

Finally they entered Switzerland by way of Basle—where a fat and 'gemütlich' maker of flour gave an order for the 'Steamer'; and so on to Zürich, where the great silver car drew up before the hotel on a shimmeringly hot Saturday afternoon. After Chester had dismounted and the luggage had been placed in a neat row on the pavement, a blue-uniformed porter climbed aboard to direct Mason to the hotel stables where the car was to be quartered.

Chester was glad to see that his agent in Switzerland—this agent was shared by the Chester company and two others—had made admirably dignified arrangements. The hotel authorities had evidently been impressed by what they had heard of the company's importance; and a bowing manager impressed Chester by walking almost backwards in a flurry of politeness as he ushered him along the purple-carpeted corridor to what appeared to be a suite reserved for royalty—minor royalty, Chester guessed.

But what really pleased him most was a letter from Stella which he held unopened in his hand, and this despite the second letter gripped beneath it which bore.

an English stamp and the handwriting of Mrs. Drummond. He knew one would be delightful and the other infuriating. As soon as the manager and porter had left him, he tore open Mrs. Drummond's letter.

"DEAR MR. CHESTER,

"It was wicked of you to leave before we could meet again; but I am afraid your efforts to avoid me will be remembered and held against you when we do meet. A woman does not appreciate such evasions, and it is her right to exact penalties.

"The Carlton informed my maid that it cannot reveal your address abroad, but they would forward letters. Unfortunately, no feminine wiles could seem to persuade them to change their rule. So I do not know when this will reach you. But when it does, I think you will realise how important it is that I see you without delay. I am sure it will deserve a special journey to London to see a delightful portrait of you which is lying beside me as I write. I think you can imagine how interested your friends and relations in America will be when they receive copies. So be sensible and come back.

"Yours, as always,

"ISOBEL DRUMMOND."

Chester threw the letter on the floor and got up. He lit one of his favourite cigars and paced up and down the large apartment. It was quite clear now that it was not

seduction she was after, but just good plain cash. Mrs. Drummond was, in fact, a common, thorough-going adventuress. He had heard about such people, and that they often got away scotfree with this kind of hole-and-corner blackmail, for the simple reason that most men would be terrified of such things, if revealed, upsetting their social position. But why did she not enclose one of the prints if the photograph was a good one? Perhaps she just wanted to wear him down, and soften him up for the meal to come, so to speak.

Chester was perfectly aware of the embarrassment it would cause him in America if copies of this photograph were sent there. It would, for example, be a godsend to the press. He also realised that it would not be quite such a blow to him personally as it would to someone in London with a high social position to maintain, and possibly a family involved. Mrs. Drummond must be aware of that too, but must feel that more money would be forthcoming for only a slightly greater risk.

He was coming steadily to two conclusions. First, that Mrs. Drummond would not risk losing the money she hoped to get, and he stalled a little. Second, that his dear Stella would find a way out of the whole wretched affair in any case. He was damned if he would pay if he could possibly help it. And, one day—he thought—what revenge he would plan! He would dearly have liked to take the matter to the police, but he was sure that Mrs. Drummond would always be non-committal

on paper. She would probably be vindictive, too, and even if she got nothing out of it, send the photographs to the States to get her own back, whatever happened. But, he repeated to himself, Stella would think up some wonderful scheme.

He went over to the table, picked up Stella's letter, and walked out on to the balcony. Before him was spread the deep blue surface of the Zürich lake with the low hills on either side dotted with the white walls of summer chalets. In the far distance, stretching across the horizon, rose the shadowy Alpine peaks. Chester sat down on a wicker chair and opened the letter. He knew what it would contain, but it was just as welcome for all that. He read:

"MY DEAR HOWARD,

"Welcome to Zürich. Dinner will await you at eight. It will be very good to get a glimpse of you after so long.

"Yours always,

"STELLA."

At a quarter to eight Chester and Julius left their hotel to walk the few hundred yards which separated them from Stella Barrington's hotel. They were greeted and shown up to her room as if they were visiting royalty—big-time royalty now—and Chester could not help feeling a swelling pride that an American opera singer should have made such a reputation that

an international hotel of this standing should treat her like a queen.

As the gilded cage of the lift slowly ascended to the first floor—Chester had tried to walk up but had been prevented by a horrified manager—the years of his friendship with Stella came sharply into focus, from the days when they had nearly had an *affaire*, through a strange period of sparring, into a lasting relationship in which each had come to accept the other on terms of easy intimacy, each contributing a powerful affection to perpetuate a friendship unique in the experience of them both.

The manager knocked on the door of Stella's suite and discreetly withdrew. The door was opened by her maid, Ella, who led them into a large and luxuriously furnished room looking on to the lake.

"Stella, my dear, at last!"

"Howard, my dear, how wonderful!"

And they were in each other's arms.

After the welcome was over and Stella had assured him she was now almost recovered from her operation, she was ceremoniously introduced to Julius, whom she had never seen. Julius sat up and solemnly offered his right paw, and after Stella had shaken it and kissed his furry head, he stood back from her with tail wagging, raised his head, and uttered three short barks.

"Oh, Howard, doesn't he like me?" she cried.

"Of course he does," laughed Chester, "look at his tail. That is his special approval bark. He has a sort of

code. One bark repeated at intervals is to call attention to himself; two short gruff barks means he disapproves; one bark, one whimper, and one bark means he is worried; and three barks is approval. He seldom indulges in unrestrained barking unless he is very happy, and even then the barks generally come in threes."

He then explained about Julius's evening spoonful of Marsala, and Stella was delighted.

"It shall be ordered at once," she said, and called in to her maid to tell the waiter. "You and Julius will long be remembered here after this!"

It was with a very solemn face that the waiter brought a wine-glass of Marsala and a silver spoon. He watched Chester hand Stella the spoonful and show her how Julius liked it tipped down his throat; he was still looking severe as he took back the empty spoon with scarcely a glance at the satisfied customer.

They chatted about friends and about opera and passed the time happily as they sat on the balcony drinking their aperitifs. Chester thought Stella looked more handsome than ever, with her black hair and her large light-blue eyes—a combination that he found irresistible in women—set off by a simple frock based on Swiss peasant dress, with a pink silk apron.

Stella leant back and looked at Chester with a twinkle in her eyes.

"Now, my dear, what is this business you hinted at in the letter you wrote from Paris?"

As Chester told her the Drummond story in detail she grew thoughtful. For some reason it became more serious in the telling than he had felt it to be in reality.

"But she must be a devil, that one and my dear Howard—with all your experience of my sex—did you not suspect anything?"

"No," he admitted, "I was attracted to her in a mild fashion, but I objected strongly to the way she effected our meetings and almost threw herself at my head. But I never suspected her of downright badness. Even now I cannot quite take the business seriously, although I'm damned irritated."

"Oh, I think you should take it seriously; I do, really. I wonder if perhaps she was genuinely interested in you at first and felt slighted into taking action. No, perhaps not; blackmail is scarcely the weapon of such a woman." She paused. "But now about the immediate threat. She is first trying you out, I should imagine. I have a feeling she has actually got an embarrassing photograph."

Stella broke off while the waiter came out through the tall windows, bearing the first course.

"At all events," she continued, "you can hold up the proceedings for a little longer by writing back and questioning the existence of the photograph. You can point out that flash photography is a very chancy business—I know, that only too well from stage experience—and as the man only had time for one shot (as the gentlemen of the press call it), you doubt very much

if indeed there is a photo at all; and, if there is, it is probably blurred and unrecognisable."

"Yes, my dear, that is true enough and good advice. But what if the gamble has come off and there is a good photo? We both feel there is, really, don't we?"

"Ah, but wait! I have a plan for you."

"Wonderful Stella! For heaven's sake tell me, as I shall be in the wilds of Austria when the next blow falls. I shall tell her my address there so that I can get the thing over and done with as soon as possible."

"When you write, you must not only cast suspicion on the existence or quality of the photo, but say you will want two prints—one to keep by you and one to submit to a lawyer friend to see if he feels it is serious enough for you to continue negotiations with her. This will suit her all right, because if the photo is really compromising she will realise that any shrewd person will realise it and tell you so. After all, the more prints which get about, the better, from her point of view. If, you must say, the photos are good, a suitable arrangement might be entered into. But make it look as if you are stiffening, and that you will only play her game if you are thoroughly convinced. She will not risk losing your money by threatening hasty action when all you've asked for is proof of what she says. She knows she can't be proceeded against by simply sending you the prints, and she'll take good care not to put anything incriminating in her letters."

"Then what?" put in Chester, who was getting impatient to know what the plan might be.

"Then you must immediately send one of the prints to me—keep yours in case things go wrong here—and I shall have it copied and a dozen or so prints made here in Zürich. I can get the hotel manager to arrange it—I shall tell him it is a joke between some of my friends. Then I shall have a number of typewritten captions done, just as I have for my press portraits, made to look as if they have been issued by a Paris press agency."

Chester was now completely at sea, and his face must have shown it.

"Don't look so bewildered, my dear—your Stella knows what she is about. You forget I spend many hours with photographers and the gentlemen of the press. Now listen. The caption will read: PROMINENT AMERICAN INDUSTRIALIST RECEIVES PRIZE KISS AFTER CONTRIBUTING LARGE GIFT TO THE PARIS FUND FOR THE BLIND AT MIDNIGHT CHARITY SHOW IN THE FRENCH CAPITAL. HOWARD L. CHESTER, OF THE CHESTER LOCOMOTIVE MANUFACTURING CORPORATION, CAUGHT BY THE CAMERA RECEIVING HIS PRIZE.

"I shall then send the prints to my own agent in New York and ask him to place one or two in the New York papers. Everyone knows about Paris night life and accepts it, and it will do you great credit. It will also spike Madame Drummond's guns with a vengeance!"

Chester threw back his head and burst out laughing.

"What an amazing woman you are, Stella!—oh, my, what a wonderful idea! I should love to see her face when she sees it. And she can't possibly go after me or anyone else after that!"

"But, Howard, remember; you must write your agent in Paris to visit the biggest of the blind organisations there and give them a substantial cheque; also to explain that a photograph may reach them from America of a non-existent charity show given on their behalf. With your cheque in their pocket they will be only too glad not to deny that such an entertainment took place. You might also put in a joking remark about the show in your next letter to your father. By the way, tell your agent it would be as well for the Paris fund for the blind to announce with thanks the receipt of your handsome gift. That will make quite a nice paragraph in the New York papers at a suitable time before they can receive any of the photographs in Paris."

Chester was so pleased and grateful, that it was some time before he remembered to tell Stella the details of his plot against Count von Laufenthal. She was both approving of Chester trying to help his friend, and fearful lest he should come to some harm.

"No; seriously, my dear, you don't know these continental nobility like I do; especially the rich and powerful ones. And—this may surprise you—I have met your Count, too. He is to be reckoned with. They are all of them not only as proud as Lucifer but as

ruthless as the devil himself. They will stop at nothing if they think it worth it, and there have been numerous accidents and unfortunate happenings which nobody is able, or willing, to explain. Why, one of them even threatened to have me boycotted by the Vienna Opera if I did not become his mistress."

"Good heavens, Stella, what did you do?"

"I hit him so hard across the face with the back of my hand—I was wearing a small diamond ring at the time—that he looked as if he had come out second best in a duel. And before he could lay hands on me—as he seemed about to—I was at the door and told him, in parting, that if ever I heard one whisper of reprisals I would bring all my considerable influence to bear in making his life a hell. And I would have done just that, too!"

Stella's eyes were blazing at the memory, and then they suddenly relaxed and crinkled into a wicked smile.

"You see," she went on, "I had been quite attracted to him up to that time. But, in any case, if you are a busy opera singer, it is difficult to fit such things into one's life." She waved her hand. "They tend to get a little out of control at times, and it is bad for a career if one is making love in an Alpine Schloss at the time one is supposed to be on the stage singing Mimi."

The conversation then drifted to other fields and other memories. Below, the people of Zürich promenaded in cheerful groups through the ornamental gardens, and beyond lay the calm waters of the lake and

the lengthening shadows of the trees and chalets on the distant shores.

Later that evening Chester drove Stella to a small inn on the eastern hills above the lake, where they danced until midnight on a little wooden platform strung with coloured lanterns. There was a hot and happy crowd of villagers, a three-piece orchestra for the music, and iced beer in tall glasses for the intervals.

They drove back under the heavy layer of stars. A new moon hung low in the sky and gave no light. The 'Steamer's' acetylene headlamps cut a white tunnel before them, alive with a million insects, and Stella was delighted at the quiet journey, with only the noise of the tyres to accompany their conversation. It was the first time Chester had driven the new car by night, and his companion suggested that here was another and romantic appeal of the 'Silver Steamer's' which Chester could dangle before his prospective buyers.

As soon as he reached his hotel room Chester wrote to Mrs. Drummond. He took the letter down to the night porter and told him he wanted it expressed first thing in the morning.^h Then he went to bed with a feeling that he had at least got rid of the Drummond problem for a few days, and that his mind was now free to direct to more sane and tangible matters.

Next morning, at ten o'clock—waved on his way by Stella from her balcony—he set off for Geneva with a light heart—there to give a demonstration for the eldest and most dashing son of the leading brewer.

Unfortunately, there was confusion about the meeting—the brewer was away—and Chester was held up for nearly a week. Then the young man turned down the ‘Steamer’ on the understandable grounds that it made no exciting noise, and the father was thankfully relieved of his promise. He also had the curious notion that the price was excessive.

Now at last Chester was free to pursue the Count. Amid a downpour of warm and welcome rain he turned the ‘Steamer’s’ elegant silver nose in the direction of Buchs and the doorway to the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

VII

The Count is Warned

AFTER spending a comfortable night at the inn at Feldkirch they set off for the Arlberg pass. Chester could now, for a time, banish thoughts of the Count as the 'Steamer' demanded all his attention. He had never before driven a steam-car over a mountain pass, and although Mason had taken aboard what he hoped would be enough cans of fuel and water, he wondered how the car would stand up to the severity of the roads ahead. But all proved well. As they wound their way up the pass at a snail's pace, and through the villages—where the modest populations turned out to wave them on their way—Chester saw that his 'Steamer' was capable of all he hoped of her. He was particularly pleased with the way she could sustain her steam pressure on the severe and sometimes dangerous climbs.

All that morning they twisted slowly along beneath the towering walls of grey rock. Then they ran down thankfully through the lower pine- and fir-clad slopes, and at last on to the floor of the rich and cultivated valley of the Inn, with the mountains retreating through the summer haze to either side, and the river carving its swift route amongst the fields.

By mid-afternoon they could see the sun catching the

distant roofs of Innsbruck, and soon after four o'clock Chester was steering the 'Steamer' through a herd of dilatory cattle which surrounded the car on the outskirts of the city; Julius nearly caused a stampede by barking furiously at a cow that put her black and white head over the back of the 'Steamer' and stared at him.

At the beginning of a narrow road between pink-washed buildings Chester enquired of someone he took to be an official as to where he could find the Hotel Goldene Sonne, and was puzzled by the difficulty of understanding the man's dialect. After repetitions and twisting of hands and arms, Chester learnt his direction, and a few minutes later the hotel was put into a minor uproar of excitement by their arrival. They had drawn up at the entrance beneath the finely-wrought and newly-painted iron sign showing a golden sun surrounded by resplendent rays.

The outstanding character at the Goldene Sonne was soon seen to be the head porter, Franz, who welcomed Chester with various gestures of pleasure and solicitude, gestures which well fitted his enormous bulk; his enormous moustaches and the impressive plum-coloured uniform with its half-acre of gold braid.

When the nationality, wealth and standing of the party had been duly assessed, the manager was summoned and presented a pleasant enough appearance for so small an individual. He took them to inspect what he called a choice selection of rooms, and Chester immediately chose the first he saw—chiefly because it was

large and looked out to the back of the city and up to the great mountain screen behind, but also because the large heating Ofen attracted him by its domical top and the blue porcelain spheres half sunk all over it, creating an effect of some sort of fabulous pudding. Mason was accommodated near-by in almost as grand a chamber; but he came into Chester a few minutes later with a gloomy face and asked what the voluminous and billowy object was that lay on top of his bed. Chester explained it was called a *plumeau* and was half-filled with feathers.

"It's supposed to be a blanket, Mason, but I hate the darned things. They either slip off altogether and leave you freezing in the cold night air, or your feet stick out at the far end and freeze up on their own. You won't like it a bit. We will have some more blankets like the thin thing you probably saw lying underneath the white monster. The nights will be very cold here, even at this time of year."

"Thank you, sir," murmured Mason, "I thought there was something wrong with the thing. They must be odd people," he added, and picked up Julius to take him off for his evening meal.

When the party was comfortably installed and Mason had unpacked, they went down to dine in the pine-panelled eating-room which was noisily cheerful with the sounds of loud talk, loud laughter and the clink of capacious beer tankards. Needless to say, a delighted uproar was caused after the waiter said there was no

Marsala in the place. Mason had to fetch his emergency bottle from upstairs and then Julius was ceremoniously served his spoonful, and one of the serving-maids nearly had hysterics.

That night Chester went to sleep tired and well satisfied with the world, and pleasantly anxious to be off on what he liked to call—to himself—his chivalrous mission.

Next morning a downpour of rain blotted out the screen of mountains which Chester had hoped to view from the ~~grandstand~~ of his balcony, and he went downstairs to breakfast—preceded by an energetic Julius—in an irritable mood. As he passed through the hall he caught sight of Franz and went over to him. Franz was all bows and smiles.

"Tell me, Franz, how do I get to the castle of Count von Laufenthal?"

Franz immediately stiffened and the smile almost left his face. "You wish to view the Schloss, mein Herr?" he asked rather off-handedly, as if it were natural for a rich but common-or-garden American to see how the aristocracy of Europe lived. And then before Chester had time to answer: "It is a little difficult while the Count is in residence, but it might be arranged. I have connections there." He looked down and brushed an invisible crumb off his coat.

"Hey now, wait a minute, Franz," said Chester with spirit, and Franz looked up: "It's the Count I have come to see—on business. I have already written to him

advising him of my arrival and saying 'I will call on him.'

"Ah, mein Herr, that is different—I am sorry: I misunderstood." Again he was all smiles, and with a flourish produced a map from under his counter. They went over the route, and Chester saw that the Castle was only about half an hour's drive to the south-east of the city.

Chester had been thinking that Franz might well be a considerable asset in the difficult business on hand, but plenty of encouragement would probably prove necessary. He casually took out his wallet and removed a bank-note. Without a word he placed it on the counter and slid it across to where Franz's large pudgy hand could cover it.

Franz said nothing and as casually put the money in his trouser pocket.

"I may want some help and information from time to time," he said, not quite sure that he had struck exactly the right German idiom for the latter phrase, but quite certain that Franz appreciated that some service would be required for which good money would be paid.

"I am always at your service, mein Herr," and he bowed slightly.

Chester went into breakfast and found Mason already started. As Chester went over to his table, a pretty, plump maid came up to him and told him his table was on the other side of the room. Chester frowned, for a moment not realising what she meant. Then he scowled

at the girl who¹ looked at him in surprise. Chester spoke slowly in his rather stilted German: "Herr Mason and I take all our meals together, unless I have guests. Is that understood? Please tell whoever it is who arranges such things."

The girl, still looking surprised, bobbed her head and said she indeed understood. Chester saw a number of the guests quickly look down at their food when he caught them staring at him.

When Chester had sat down and ordered his breakfast he ~~told~~ Mason about Schloss Ansbach, and that he had liberally tipped Franz for future services to be rendered.

"I'm not sure that was a good thing to do, sir; I don't much like the looks of Master Franz. Too fat and smarmy. You never know with these foreigners. As soon stab you in the back as look at you. But he may be useful, I suppose. But we don't know yet, do we, sir, just exactly what we shall be up against?"

Chester, now somewhat cheered up, told him not to be gloomy and that these porters in small towns—he knew the look of them—could be very useful in telling one the lie of the land and what was going on locally, even if they were a bit grasping. Chester felt that eleven o'clock was a good time to pay his visit to the Count, and Mason said he would have the 'Steamer' ready and round at the hotel entrance by half-past ten.

By the time the start was made for Schloss Ansbach the sun had come out, and great white cumulus clouds

were beating up from over the Brenner. The usual group of curious onlookers—more picturesque this time with their dirndls and leather breeches—stood admiring the 'Steamer' and saw the party off. Chester was at the wheel with Mason beside him, and Julius in his usual place at the back.

Schloss Ansbach could be seen in the distance as soon as they were free of the city. It stood out like a remote white face among the firs on the lower slopes of the mountains. As they approached, it took on a more complex appearance and Chester could see what an impressive building it was. The Castle was built on a small bluff, with a turret at each end and the great white façade dotted with the many small windows set deep in the thick walls, and the bright blue shutters opened back against the whitewashed surface. A group of smaller buildings seemed to cluster at the back of the main structure, and a wall descended steeply to what appeared to be the entrance. Behind the Castle the massed fir trees covered the steep sides of the mountain and formed a magnificent backdrop to the scene.

"Quite a place, Mason, quite a place," exclaimed Chester as he swung the car off the road and on to the steep driveway which curled up out of sight among the firs. Mason craned his neck to look up at the building which at every turn could be seen towering above them.

Only a quiet crunching of gravel announced their passage under the great stone arch of the gateway and

into the courtyard beyond. Chester drew up in the shadow of the south wall and cut the burners. He continued to sit in the car and look around him. There was not a sound, and the rows of deep dark windows seemed to intensify the mystery he felt must surround such places. He told himself it was the natural reaction of an American to the romance of Europe, with even its violent deeds seeming romantic if committed in settings like this.

In the shadowed framework of a window he suddenly noticed a dark face staring down at him. Otherwise there was no sign of life.

This oppressive silence had the effect of somewhat daunting Chester. He did not know what he had expected—perhaps some measure of bustle, of servants running hither and thither—and the lack of all activity took him unawares.

Julius barked twice—two staccato barks—then relapsed into silence.

"You're sure right, old son. I don't like the place any more than you do," said Chester turning round to pat the dog. "You stay in the car, Mason," he added, getting out and taking off his cap and the long white motoring coat. "I'll take Julius with me—he may come in useful to distract attention. Come, Julius!"

The poodle waited for Chester to open the rear door, then he plopped down slowly and almost suspiciously, and started sniffing loudly as he trotted

behind Chester across the courtyard and up the steps to the elaborately carved doorway.

Chester reached up for the wrought iron bell-pull and rang. Almost at once, as if the American had been expected at this exact hour, the great door was opened—no creaking, noted Chester with approval—and a liveried footman bowed slightly and requested him to enter.

Without more words the footman turned and led the way down the long and low-vaulted hall. Chester took in a vista of heavy carved chests and other furniture and a forest of antlers sprouting from the walls, each pair carefully inscribed with the date of the animal's demise. As they neared the end of the hall Chester heard the noise of a door opening somewhere behind him and he looked round. He stopped abruptly and Julius cannoned into him with a yelp. For there was no doubt who it was who stood in the half-opened doorway, dressed in a gay red dirndl with a blue figured apron. It was Gabriele von Laufenthal.

Chester recognised the small, well-proportioned head with the high clear forehead, the straight nose and the quiet brown eyes; recognised them from photographs Peter Melville had shown him and descriptions he had detailed enthusiastically.

As Chester paused, irresolute, he heard the footman stop too. At the same time Julius looked round: with three quick barks of approval he trotted up to the girl and, without prompting, sat up in front of her and

began paddling with his front paws. At this performance Chester decided he could now make a natural approach as the owner of the importunate poodle. He glanced back to see the footman standing stiffly by the end door, frowning at the scene but obviously not daring to interfere. The wretched fellow will report this, damn him, thought Chester. But he was determined to take as much advantage of the chance meeting as he could. It would be very difficult, he knew, for a mere ~~footman~~ to break into a conversation with the Count's daughter, no matter ~~what~~ his orders were.

Gabriele had come forward, and with a little cry of pleasure had bent down to shake hands with the dog. She scarcely had a chance to do this before Julius was licking her all over her face as if they had known one another for months.

"You are surely Gabriele?" asked Chester quickly in English.

The girl looked up with an expression in her eyes which Chester thought combined both pleasure and apprehension. Then she nodded.

"Listen carefully," went on Chester, "Peter and I—my name is Howard Chester—pray you not to give up hope. We will find a way to persuade your father. Remember, do—not—give—up—hope. Peter sends all his love."

By now the footman had decided to come nearer, and Chester changed to German, and the address of one who did not know who the girl was.

"His name is Julius, gnädiges Fräulein. He seems to have taken a great liking to you."

Gabriele took up her part immediately and began making dog noises to Julius, interspersing them with the German equivalents of how sweet, what a wonderful poodle, and so on, and ending with a delightfully pronounced and repeated "Yoolius". The footman now risked an interruption. He bowed to Gabriele and said that the Count, her father, was waiting for the gentleman, and perhaps he should escort him to the library.

Chester turned to the man and said:

"Perhaps it would be best to leave my dog with this lady, if she would be so kind as to look after him." At which Gabriele immediately broke in and said she would love to take care of Julius whilst he saw her father.

Chester bowed to her and turned to follow the footman through the door at the end of the hall, and along more corridors bristling with antlers, and finally to a door on which the man knocked before throwing it open with the announcement of "Herr Howard Chester!"

Chester found himself in a room almost as long as the hall, with bookshelves all down one side and windows down the other. His eye took in so many knick-knacks—including a veritable gallery of silver-framed photographs—and pieces of furniture that he at once thought of an obstacle race. But such frivolous analogies were soon dispelled by the face and figure of the man who impassively waited for him to advance the whole length

of the chamber.⁹ Good technique, thought Chester; make your visitor walk a mile to the presence and thereby intimidate him at the outset.

As Chester took in the figure of his host, he saw the Count's eyes travel over him as carefully and assessingly as the eyes of the madam had done in the rue de Penthièvre. "If he knows anything about clothes and money," Chester said to himself, "he ought to get an idea of where I come from and what I am worth."

Count von Laufenthal was a tall thin man with a high domed forehead and aquiline nose. He was dressed in a grey jacket and trousers with a broad-green stripe down each leg. His eyes—as John Elliott had told him—were set rather close together and were of a pale watery blue, which Chester thought most unpleasant. In fact he thought that everything about the Count was unpleasant.

Chester held out his hand as he approached the Count and started to greet him in German:

"How do you do, Count——"

But the Count's hands remained firmly behind his back. Two up to the Count, thought Chester; there's nothing like letting your visitor stretch out his hand and letting it hang there unwanted in mid-air. He cannot know why I have come and yet he insults me at the start. Well, here goes. But just as Chester was slowly lowering his arm and about to speak, the Count said, in perfectly-pronounced English:

"To what do I owe this visit, Mr. Chester? You write

and say you are coming today, without even having the courtesy to wait for a reply. In your letter you say it is about a private matter of great urgency. I would tell you that I have no private matters that I can conceive it possible to discuss with you or any other American; but it amuses me to know what you think we can profitably discuss."

Chester was slowly but steadily beginning to see red. He despised himself for feeling anger at such a cheap gambit, but anger it was which now possessed him. Very deliberately he sat down in the most comfortable chair he could see and pulled out his cigar case. He took his time choosing a Hoyo, cut off the end with a silver cutter and lit the cigar with a silver petroleum lighter. He inhaled, lifted his head and slowly blew a mouthful of smoke into the air. The Count remained standing and, to Chester's great satisfaction, was himself now somewhat red in the face.

"Well, Count," said Chester, and he gave his voice a purposely accentuated Yankee drawl. "In my country it is customary in polite society to shake hands with your guests. A Kentucky colonel would even do that to a damn-Yankee, if you know what they both are; and he would then offer him a chair. He would also keep a civil tongue in his head."

Chester suddenly slammed down his hand on the arm of his chair and got up, two actions so sudden that they visibly took the Count off-guard. Before he could say anything Chester continued: "And I would warn you,

sir, right here and now, to do just that, or else you may be very sorry for it!"

The Count recovered himself and slightly lowered his eyelids.

"Am I to understand you are threatening me, Mr. Chester?" he asked quietly and slowly.

"You can understand anything you like, Count. But, by jimminy, you will be sorry all right. No—don't interrupt. You had better let me speak my piece. I had intended to have a friendly chat and settle this thing I have in mind in a friendly way. Now I have a shrewd idea you have guessed I'm here on behalf of my friend Peter Melville who wants to commit the terrible crime of marrying your daughter."

The Count let out a hissing "Ach so!" which, of course, told Chester that actually he had not guessed.

"So you did not know? Well, that is the reason for my visit, and there is quite a sting in the tail, I can assure you." Chester again sat down, and went on: "I think the name Loder means something to you, Count—ah, I see by your eyes that it does. Well, before I put my little proposition, I will tell you what I want you to do. It is simply to allow your daughter to marry my friend Melville and—and the 'and' is very important I believe in this country—and to give her your full parental blessing for all to know. Now no one in his right mind can say that an up-and-coming successful United States diplomat is not fit to marry anyone's daughter, even an Austrian count's; so there's nothing

basically wrong about the whole thing. As I am sure they love one another, and as I know Melville has more than enough money, there cannot be any objection worth naming. The objections not worth naming I have heard all about, and I think—now we are speaking our minds—I think they are despicable.”

There was silence in the library. The Count continued to gaze at Chester: Chester held the gaze for a minute, then looked beyond and out of the window to the wonderful panorama of trees and mountains and blue distance beyond.

Then the Count spoke: “After this impertinent harangue, Mr. Chester, what else have you to say?”

There was a cutting edge to his voice.

Chester turned to his opponent and smiled: “My little proposition, Count—and I would emphasise here and now that this visit is entirely of my own cooking—concerns that certain Herr Loder I spoke of, who lives in Vienna. After full investigation I have proof positive that a certain rich and powerful man deliberately ruined Herr Loder in order to gain some property. On encountering the natural opposition of this unfortunate man to such strong-arm methods the rich man began exerting his power, and in the end had resort not only to dishonest means but—so my enquiries now reveal—to criminal acts. I enquired why this was not exposed at the time by the unfortunate Herr Loder, and I discovered that the rich man had taken the precaution of threatening the ruin of Herr Loder’s son if there was

any trouble. Now, however, that son is dead and the full story has fortunately fallen into my hands. To me, at the present time, it is a godsend, Count. For, you see I too, am rich, and although I am not otherwise powerful in this country, I have means of converting my money into power."

"And how," suddenly put in the Count, "would you imagine you could influence this powerful man by means of your money, Mr. Chester?"

"Quite simple, my dear Count. At the moment I am one of the very few people in the world who knows the facts, and the only one to have the means of using them. I would take steps to see that everyone of any importance in Vienna knew the truth about the Loder case. There would, of course, be no question of legal proceedings after all these years, but the powerful man I have in mind has great prestige and is highly regarded as a man of honour. It would be a pity, I think you would agree, for that reputation to suffer needlessly, especially when all could be settled by a gesture which would bring—how shall I say—considerable added prestige, international prestige, to the powerful man we are speaking about."

Chester got up from his chair and went over to one of the windows. He looked down at the multitude of firs that clung to the rocks beneath the Castle and swept down and away to the valley in a bristling green carpet.

"You have a wonderful view from here," remarked

Chester, as he turned to face the Count and leaned back against the sill. He thought he could detect a subtle change in Count von Laufenthal's expression. He was looking straight down the room, his eyes fixed on nothing. Chester could not interpret the change, but he felt satisfied that what at first had been cold contempt mixed with anger had now added to it at least an element of apprehension, if not fear.

He ~~was~~ not sure how to end the interview, but the Count saved him the trouble of deciding. He walked over to an embroidered and tasselled bell-pull on which he gave a single vicious tug. Then he turned to Chester:

"Your imaginary story has certain points of interest which I will consider at my leisure. I will write to you at Innsbruck."

"My leisure," replied Chester, "is expansive but not inexhaustible. Measured in days I might put it at a week or two, but not longer. I am staying at the Goldene Sonne," he added.

The door opened and the footman appeared and bowed.

"Herr Chester is leaving," said the Count and thereupon walked to his desk and sat down, without looking at Chester and without saying another word. Chester was expecting some such a gesture and was not again angry at it. But as he moved towards the door he caught himself in a momentary fantasy which saw him fling his cigar butt out of the window and down amongst the fir trees: these immediately caught fire and

enveloped the Count and his castle in a glorious holocaust. Pity the trees are so damp here, he added to round off his thoughts.

The footman led the way back between the white walls and the antlers until they stood again in the long hall. Chester stopped half-way along it, and the footman also stopped and turned. Chester knew the man realised his master's feelings about him, and it was plainly written in the contemptuous expression.

"Be so good as to fetch my dog," said Chester quietly.

"I will see if the *Comtesse* can be disturbed," he said patronisingly. Chester had not long to wait. There was the sound of footsteps, and Gabriele appeared awkwardly carrying—much to Chester's surprise—the not very light person of Julius, who sprawled in the girl's arms wearing one of his inane smiles. The footman followed Gabriele out into the hall with a look of intense disgust which seemed mostly directed at Julius.

Chester wondered why on earth the girl should so burden herself with the poodle—unless it was genuine affection—but soon realised the reason. With a great effort, Gabriele transferred the unresisting Julius into Chester's arms instead of putting the dog down on the floor.

"What a wonderful little dog Julius is," she said in German, "do hold him a moment while I say good-bye." Whereupon she appeared to take Julius's head in her hands and look into his eyes; but her left hand was partly on his collar and partly nudging Chester in the

chest. Chester glanced down and saw that a small bundle of folded paper was fixed under Julius's collar by means of black cotton, the packet being almost invisible as it pressed into the hair of the dog's neck.

"I am so glad you like him, my dear *Comtesse*, and most grateful to you for looking after him while I visited your father. Good-bye, and thank you again."

Chester put Julius gently on the floor, praying that he would not start twisting his neck and drawing attention to himself on the way through the great studded door, which was now held open by the footman. But the footman did not deign to look either at Chester or Julius. However, Chester noted with amusement that the man managed to swivel his eyes sufficiently to take in the 'Steamer', the like of which Chester guessed he had never seen before.

Mason already had the burners going, and as Chester put on his coat and cap he glanced back at the door. It was not quite closed and a single eye was clearly visible peering through the narrow gap.

As Chester carefully steered the 'Steamer' down the steep drive between the firs, he said to Mason: "Take out your knife and cut away that small package tied inside Julius's collar. Be quick, Mason, as we can be seen the moment we get clear of this forest at the bottom of the hill. Then put the package in my side pocket."

Mason leant back over his seat and lifted Julius up and over on to his lap. The package was taken off and

deposited, and Julius back on his own seat by the time they emerged into the open and began the journey back along the white and now dusty road to Innsbruck.

As they drove along through the quiet countryside, Chester went over the interview in his mind and admitted to himself that he had not handled it very well. He realised that although he had met hundreds of 'continentals' he had never before confronted on his own ground a rich and powerful noble who hated all Americans and him in particular.

The Count had conducted the meeting exactly as he pleased. But Chester consoled himself with the fact that what he had come to say he had said, and the Count could be in no doubt that he meant exactly what he said. He described his experience to Mason, but the latter had feelings on the subject which surprised Chester.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I don't think a gentleman of your standing should voluntarily put himself in the position of being insulted by a foreigner, whoever he may be. And all because of a woman, too." Mason looked offended, as if he too had been slighted.

"Dear Mason," said Chester with a laugh, "always reliable on every subject except women—but you should have seen the lady Gabriele herself. Your heart would have melted, and you would willingly have undergone any insult the Count could invent."

"Not me, sir," answered Mason bitterly: "No woman's worth it. I am, sir, if I may say so, very reliable on the subject of women. It is you who are so

soft-hearted and let yourself be influenced against your better judgment. It is women, Mr. Howard, who are always unreliable."

Just outside a village on the outskirts of the city, Chester pulled up and took Gabriele's note from his pocket.

"DEAR MR. CHESTER (it read in English),

"I am so unhappy and yet so glad at your message about Peter. I have been made to promise not to write to Peter, but tell him I love him with all my heart and will always love him so. It is so kind of you to say to keep up my courage, but I fear you can do nothing, as my father will not change his intentions. But thank you again for speaking to me and for letting me look after Julius.

"GABRIELE."

Chester read it through and put it in his pocket without showing it to Mason. Trusting as he was of Mason, he felt that it would somehow desecrate the note to show it to anyone with such a poor opinion of the other sex. He determined to send the note straight on to Melville: it would not make him happy, but Chester knew that he would wish to possess it.

They arrived back at the Goldene Sonne in good time for lunch. Chester decided that he would have a talk with Franzas soon as possible after the meal. He wanted now to gain as much local colour as he could and learn

what was thought about the Count in his own land and neighbourhood. Chester felt he could not know too much about his opponent, especially a man who lived in such a totally different world to his own. It again occurred to him that to enlist the services of such a doubtful informant as Franz was not altogether desirable; but, he thought, beggars cannot be choosers in a strange land, and in any case it could do no harm.

So it was that he went up to Franz when the porter had returned from his lunch, and leaned on the counter waiting for another guest to be given the times of trains to Kufstein. Then he said casually:

"Franz, what sort of a reputation has Count von Laufenthal around these parts?"

"Reputation, Herr Chester?" Franz was bland and fatherly: "How do you mean, sir, reputation?"

"Well now, is he liked by his work-people and the villagers and so on?"

Franz looked up at the ceiling and pursed his lips: "Well—he is, of course, a very severe man, very powerful; but on the whole just."

After a few more such banalities Chester realised that he had been foolish to put such questions to the man. If there was any actual fact he wanted, maybe Franz would prove useful and earn his tip. But there was certainly nothing to be gained from these meaningless answers. So he thanked Franz for his help and went up to his room to write to Peter Melville. He described the meeting with the Count and enclosed Gabriele's

note, promising to keep him posted when more news came to hand.

That evening he put some simple questions to Franz and received accurate answers, although the man seemed a little strained and over-bland at the same time.

"Franz, everyone has heard of the tragic death of the Count's son. I understand it happened in a castle nearby. Is that so? If it is, I should like to visit the place. I'm fond of romantic tragedies."

Franz told him the castle was called Schloss Terfen; that it was set into the mountains some twenty miles up the valley towards Jenbach; that the Count had sold it to a Viennese merchant after the tragedy; and that the old housekeeper made an unofficial habit of showing visitors the scene of the shooting if they proved generous. All this, of course, provided the merchant was not in residence. At present he was not. Chester thanked Franz and went up to bed.

"At last I've had something for my money," he laughed before saying good-night to Mason.

VIII

Castle of Death

CHESTER rose early next morning. He leaned out of his window and contentedly sniffed the pure mountain air. The sky was overcast, but the clouds rode high. He decided it was fine enough to enjoy the day's outing to Schloss Terfen, pulled in his head, and went in search of Mason to give instructions about the 'Steamer'. As he knocked on Mason's door he was aware of a curious feeling, which he could only think of as premonition. "Darn it," he said to himself, "what is this for a tough Yankee to be feeling—am I getting sentimental or superstitious, or what?" He knew it had something to do with the tragedy at Schloss Terfen, but otherwise he could not diagnose the trouble, even to himself. But one thing he had decided, in the second or two that passed before Mason opened the door and welcomed him and Julius: he would go alone to the castle, without either of them. He was vaguely aware of wanting to keep them both out of danger. But danger from what?

"Mason, I'm off to this Schloss today, this 'death castle', and I want to go alone. Be a good fellow and keep an eye on our black friend here, but otherwise do whatever you want to. Have the car ready and round by eleven and then the day is all yours. I'll be back some

time late in the afternoon or early evening, but don't worry. I will drive the 'Steamer' into that Gasse—that's their name for an alley—two blocks up the street; you can collect her from there and put her away."

Chester glanced round for Julius and saw him sitting in the far corner of the room, looking offended.

"So you're disgruntled, my boy, are you? Well, let me tell you this," he said, advancing on the poodle and wagging his finger at him, "it's all for your own good—and for mine, too, if it comes to that. I'm going to a very gloomy place and I don't want a gloomy poodle on my hands. Nor do I want a false levity in such a place, for I'll probably be in no mood to appreciate it."

Chester crouched down, grinned at Julius and puffed gently in his face. Julius put his head on one side and barked—one bark, one yelp, one bark—and then gave Chester his paw.

As Chester drove the 'Silver Steamer' out of Innsbruck and along the straight, level road to the east, he felt easier in his mind; and after satisfying himself that his car was running to perfection gave himself up to a pleasant but somewhat melancholy contemplation of the picturesque valley through which he was moving so smoothly, with its continuous walls of jagged mountains rising to accompany him on either side. The subject of the Count came and went in his mind like an intermittent toothache and he was again aware of the almost unreal quality of the whole enterprise he had embarked on. He began to whistle 'Toreador, en garde' from

Carmen, and this took him away back to what made up his real life, the matter-of-fact world of motor-cars and business and the relaxations of opera, balloons and women. He felt momentarily guilty of putting women last, and wondered whether he was not trying to avoid an issue. Then, of course, there were his friends. This, however, brought him back into the unreal shadows. He was truly fond of Peter Melville and deeply shocked at the circumstances which looked like cheating him out of the delightful Gabriele. He mouthed to himself the name in its proper German lilt—"Gubri-áy-ler," with the accent on the 'ay'. It was a pretty name for a divinely pretty owner; and that set him back in the romantic determination to do what he could to rescue this damsel in distress. And the Count, damn his arrogance, thought Chester, had since the interview become a personal target as well as an obstacle to be removed.

But the old man must have been sorely hit by his son's death. Perhaps that was what had soured him. "Now, Howard, no sympathy for the man in the opposite corner—it's you or he for the canvas." And as he was saying this out loud to himself, his eyes travelled over the northern mountains ahead and came to rest on a distant spot of white nestling amongst the trees on the lower slopes.

"That, if I'm not mistaken, is Schloss Terfen," and he figured it would take another half-hour's driving.

The main road continued straight down the valley of

the river Inn and soon he was slowing up so that he would not miss the side turning which he knew from Franz's description must soon lead off to the left. At last it appeared, with a dilapidated fingerpost bearing the single word 'Terfen'.

Chester turned carefully into the narrow white road. Almost at once it plunged through a pine forest which seemed to close in upon him like an army of menacing troops. He had already begun taking a dislike to the place, and even to the whole idea of his day's outing. He drove on cautiously over the rutted dusty road, seeing nothing but pine trees and scrubby undergrowth between them and the winding white surface of the road ahead. After what seemed like an hour's journey the forest trees became mixed and—to Chester—a little more homely. Then suddenly drooping firs monopolised the scene, and they too came crowding right up to the road, shutting out all but an overhead path of light. The road itself began to mount and twist steeply beyond the 'Steamer's' bonnet.

Chester was now deeply depressed, and by the time the grey stone gateway of Schloss Terfen rose above him beyond the next turn, he was on the point of abandoning the visit. But a certain peace and tranquillity in the small castle—which he soon saw in front of him—seemed to overlay the gloom, and he made up his mind to see what there was to see, now that he was here.

Schloss Terfen was somewhat like a miniature Ansbach, except that a picturesque wooden staircase

rose from the small courtyard and seemed to take the visitor up to the main entrance above. But the little pepper-pot towers were there and the steep tiled roofs, much weathered and patchy with lichen.

He stopped the car just inside the gateway and took off his dust-coat and cap. There was the same ominous hush that had hung over Ansbach. He walked slowly over the cobbles and ascended the old stairway, looking around him as he went. A large coat of arms, now faded into light browns and pinks and greys, was painted in the middle of the plaster wall opposite. Surmounting the coat was the crest—a phoenix rising from the flames—which Chester recalled having seen on the gateway at Ansbach and which he thought must be the crest of the Laufenthal family. He wondered at what distant tragedy in the family history it pointed, and realised there was now no direct heir to the title. No wonder the tragedy of this old place had rocked the Count. There was again need of the phoenix to bring this family to a new birth.

He pulled down the wrought iron bell-handle, and immediately there came to him a vigorous ringing from within the Castle, as if the old housekeeper needed an especially loud summons to bring her out.

She could soon be heard making her slow progress through the building: doors slammed, there was a noise of wood falling on stone as if she had dropped a broom, and then the slip-slap of her shoes approaching the door.

Chester had no clear idea of the approach he should make to this woman; so as a preliminary he had taken a gold twenty-kronen piece from his pocket and was ostentatiously fingering it as the door was opened.

"Was wünscht der Herr," said a tired voice, and Chester looked up into the stolid and forbidding face of the old housekeeper. She had a small snub nose, huge cheeks and straggling hairs on her chin. Her small brown eyes were already on the coin, and she asked immediately: "What can I do for you?"

Chester smiled: "If it wouldn't be too much trouble I should like to see over the Castle," he answered. "I have so often heard of the terrible tragedy which happened here, and I was curious to see the place for myself." He paused.

"I hope this will buy some small luxury you may need," he added putting the coin—which would pay for quite a number of luxuries, he felt—into the knotted brown hand. The old woman slowly transferred it to a pocket in her apron, without further words.

"I am not supposed to let strangers in," she said, as she must have said hundreds of times before, and stood back to let him pass. "But the master does not mind occasionally; that is to say if he is away and if the visitors are respectable."

Chester found the housekeeper's dialect quite easy to understand, and he imagined she had modified her Tyrolean speech for the benefit of the respectable

visitors, of whom there was clearly an endless and profitable supply.

She said no more until she had closed the door and walked to the centre of the dark hall, where she stood with hands clasped in front of her from which dangled a large ring with a dozen or so keys threaded on it. Chester noted with some amusement that all of them were shiny with wear.

The housekeeper then launched into a monotonous guide lecture which Chester was content to listen to while he peered about at the hall with its low-vaulted roof and the inevitable antlers. She told him of the Laufenthal family, sorted out the various members of it—for which Chester was grateful—and sketched in the history of Schloss Terfen up to the time when the Count allowed his son to treat it as his own residence. Then she moved off and they started a tour of the rooms on the ground floor, the tired voice droning its recital of facts as she opened doors and pointed at the objects of interest. Chester was absorbing with an almost morbid fascination the atmosphere of the place, with its yard-thick walls, its great tiled heating stoves, the stiff portraits of bygone von Laufenthals and the ornately carved furniture. Everything was kept in spotless condition although the present owner did not appear to live there for much of the year. His guide, Chester realised, was deliberately keeping the tragedy and its trappings for a fitting climax to the tour, and he was quite content to wait for it. As he was not anxious to

hurry her, he put in occasional questions from time to time to fill in the background to the story which was to come.

At last they climbed the broad circling stairway and set off down a whitewashed corridor on the first floor. The old woman stopped and turned to Chester. Her manner seemed now more tense and personal as she came to the events of that tragic year.

It had been on September 17th, 1898, that the young man had arrived with his mistress, the housekeeper and her husband having been duly informed of the date some time before. ("The master was always very thoughtful"), although he did not of course say whom he was bringing. But it was understood that it was a lady, and a rumour passed on from Ansbach said the lady was the same young Frau Rechtlin that they had been hearing about for some weeks.

"So the romance was common knowledge?" asked Chester.

"I cannot say how many people knew, gnä' Herr, but we of the family and household had known of it for a considerable time. It was my husband—he is dead now—who first told me there was a new lady in the young master's life, but that she was already married. We were all very sorry to hear it. It was not only against God's law, but our dearest hope had long been that he would take a wife."

"So they arrived here and you saw the lady for the first time?"

"Yes. They arrived from Salzburg, where the family has another residence, in the early evening, and we—my husband and I—had made ready the rooms and prepared dinner. You see, the young master only liked the two of us to live here—not counting my little son, of course—and only to get occasional help, if we needed it, from Ansbach or the village. He liked to bring his friends here—both ladies and gentlemen—and to have his privacy undisturbed."

So there had been others; Chester wondered what others, and—more interesting—what did the father feel about them. Probably, thought Chester, it was considered correct provided the ladies were obscure and that no scandal appeared in the offing. He would dearly have liked more information about these matters, but thought it inadvisable to say anything for the moment.

His guide continued: "Though I say it as shouldn't, they certainly made a picture, those two, as they stepped down from the carriage."

"What about the coachman?" asked Chester. "Did he stay here in the Castle?"

"Oh, no. The master always drove himself on such visits. He did not want to make a fuss."

Neither did he want more local witnesses than he could help, added Chester to himself.

The woman sighed: "Little did I suspect what a terrible crime he had in mind as he handed the lady down. Poor dear, he must have been suffering so much.

But for us it was all bustle, of course. Me to take them up to their room—to here—and my husband to stable the horses and lock up after us.”

Chester could not help a question: “Did he really not look unhappy or worried?” he asked.

“I often thought about that afterwards,” she answered, “but looking back I’m always sure he looked only his handsome and happy self. And when I served them at dinner they certainly looked radiantly happy together. So the master must have determined to act as if nothing was wrong. For I’m sure the poor lady knew nothing of his thoughts—then or later,” she added hesitantly.

“Don’t you think they had both decided to end it all—for whatever reason—and were both determined to spend one last happy evening together?”

“That may be, gnä’ Herr, but I cannot bring myself to believe that two young people—and her especially—could behave like they did with that fate hanging over them so near. She looked so pretty there at table in the candlelight, with her frilly blue dress and lovely diamond necklace.”

She paused and seemed to be travelling slowly back to the present. “But it was a terrible thing for the master to decide, and against God’s will. But who are we to be the judges?”

“Is there no accepted idea about why he decided to end their lives like that?”

“Different people said different things,” she said slowly, “and everything was hushed up as much as

possible. But some held that there was trouble with the lady's family, that the husband was threatening to make a public scandal, and all that. For my part, seeing how the nobility behave, I could not understand why they did not go on as they liked—but maybe the husband was a powerful man. But it was the ruin of him, too, as it turned out."

"Who was the husband?"

"He was a rich merchant in Vienna—poor fellow—and he went and shot himself as soon as he heard the news. No one seemed to take much notice of him amid all the outcry that arose. He was just the husband, they said, and what did it matter? . . . People are very cruel," she added as an afterthought as she began to walk along the corridor. She stopped before a panelled door and crossed herself. Then she unlocked it. With her hand on the latch, she turned to Chester:

"My husband and I always had strict instructions to retire immediately after serving the dinner on such occasions. We slept on the floor above, and that night we went straight to bed. My husband used to sleep like a log and my little boy, too; but I was too excited about the young couple to get much sleep that night. I lay awake far into the night, thinking of them. Then suddenly I distinctly heard two reports and a cry. I was used to the noise of guns in hunting, and although the bangs were not quite the same, I knew they were shots all right."

"Did you say two shots and a cry?" asked Chester idly,

trying to reconstruct the scene as vividly as he could.

"I didn't mean it quite in that way," she said; "as a matter of fact there was a shot, a cry, and then the second shot. I can hear those sounds as clearly today as I did all those years ago. Oh, it was terrible!"

Chester, looking now at the door which the woman was just opening, could not help feeling his flesh creep. The eerie silence of the place, the dim light in this upper corridor, the tragic tale told by one who was present, and now the actual room.

As she pushed the door inwards the woman went on:

"So I woke up my husband and lit a candle, and we came along the corridor to this door. For a moment we listened, but could hear nothing. So my husband opened the door and we went in. But there was no need of a candle in there—the moon was streaming through the open windows. We could see the two of them lying there on the bed, and my blood ran cold."

By this time she had led the way into the room and was standing at the foot of the great carved bed. Chester noticed that she again crossed herself as she stood there.

"You see, gnä' Herr, the master was lying half across the lady; and even in the moonlight we could see the blood trickling from his body all over the sheets. I can never forget the sight. Then there was the revolver grasped in his left hand—he was left-handed you see."

Chester stood there silent and motionless, too moved for words by the story, and by the fact of its being told by someone who had been in this very room with the

bodies of the unhappy lovers nine years ago. It was almost as if he had seen it himself, so vividly did his imagination construct the scene.

"And she?" he asked. "The unfortunate lady?"

"We had to go right up to the bed, gnä' Herr, to make sure she was dead. But there was no doubt of it. Shot through the heart, and lying there with her eyes wide open and staring as if she was about to pray him not to do such an awful thing. Indeed, it was a terrible act to carry out—murder and self-murder. God and his angels only know what made the young master do it."

Chester stopped staring at the bed and slowly turned his head to gaze round the room. The whole place seemed to hang heavy with the tragedy, and he felt he would remember this day and the gloom of it for the rest of his life. He took in the silent room with its heavy carved cupboards and chairs, its long velvet curtains and the blue-tiled stove. On a table between the two windows was an earthenware bowl containing a small bunch of fresh wild flowers. The woman caught his glance.

"I have always kept fresh flowers in the room," she said simply, "he was very fond of them."

Chester looked at her and smiled. She was more human than he had imagined.

"What a charming thought," he said.

They walked slowly from the room and she turned to lock the door.

"Such a senseless tragedy," he said out loud in

English; then as he realised she did not understand, said in German: "I was just thinking how terrible it was and how unnecessary."

"Unnecessary?"

"Well, perhaps not. Perhaps he saw it as the only way out of an impossible situation. In my country there would have been other ways, perhaps. But here? Who can say what was right and what was wrong?"

"Who, indeed, gnä Herr, who indeed?"

As Chester walked down the stone stairway behind his guide he was still under the sombre spell of the story he had heard and the room in which the violent events had taken place. But there was an element of unrest added to his depression, as if something was out of place in his mind. He sought for the elusive thing that lurked there, but he was too affected by the whole atmosphere of the place to bother with it now. He said good-bye to the old housekeeper at the main doorway, and before he went down the wooden stairs to the courtyard added another gold coin to her stock. She stood in the open doorway impassively watching him descend.

As Chester reached the yard he saw a boy in dirty leather breeches and an open shirt staring at the 'Steamer'. As he came up to the lad the resemblance to the housekeeper was obvious. Chester greeted him with the friendly "Grüss Gott," but the boy only gave him a sullen look and backed away against the wall which bore the faded Laufenthal coat of arms. Oh, well, thought Chester, he is yet one more of the Yankee-

hating tribe around here, and without giving the boy another thought, put on his cap and dust-coat and lit the burners.

He climbed into the driving-seat, waited a minute or two for the boiler to heat up, and then moved the regulator. He steered slowly beneath the old archway without even glancing back, and then began the steady descent between the massed and gloomy firs. A slight wind was swaying their tops and causing a melancholy sigh to spread through the forest around him. He felt more depressed than ever, and now concentrated solely on running the car as fast as he dared along the narrow road back to the valley.

Once again on the main road to Innsbruck, Chester opened the 'Steamer' up to her full speed and fairly flew the kilometres back home towards the city—like a bat out of hell, he said to himself. Slowly his spirits began to recover, but underlying his better mood there was still the sullen nagging of a problem. What problem? He even said out loud: "What for gracious sakes is it that keeps scratching at me?—Something back there in that damned Castle, something about that story. Something odd. Something that doesn't fit properly." But nothing came to solve his problem, whatever it was, and by the time he reached the outskirts of Innsbruck the visit to Schloss Terfen remained like a vivid and peculiar dream which he remembered clearly enough, but which ceased to trouble him now in his waking state.

He drove slowly through the streets and left the car in the alley he had described to Mason. Then he walked back to the hotel and pushed through the wide swing doors.

Franz came out from behind his desk to greet him and ask him if he had enjoyed the trip.

"Well now, Franz, 'enjoy' is scarcely the word. But I was mighty glad to see the place and hear the tale first hand. It surely is a gruesome story, and one that could scarcely happen in my country."

"Indeed, Herr Chester?"

"Well, you see, a man wouldn't think it necessary to kill himself and his lady love, even if he had overstepped the mark morally, and even if people had talked their heads off. Right or wrong, whichever it was, they would probably have moved to another part of the country and lived happily ever after."

"Is that so, mein Herr? But it would not be so here—they are strict about such matters on the Continent, very strict."

"You know, Franz," continued Chester without considering the man's comment, "I cannot help thinking there is something queer about that tragedy."

"Queer?" asked Franz, "What do you mean, Herr Chester, 'queer'?"

"I don't rightly know; but all the way back here there has been something knocking at my mind as if I can't quite believe what I heard. I don't know what it is, really. Maybe it's just the feeling that it was all such a

tragic fuss about nothing—a storm in a teacup, as we express it. However, as I say, I was very glad to have seen the place.”

He was just about to leave the desk, when Franz glanced round at the rows of pigeon-holes behind and exclaimed:

“Ah, your key, Herr Chester: I forgot. And there is a letter for you.”

With a sinking heart Chester recognised Mrs. Drummond’s handwriting. He took it with a grunt of thanks and went up to his room.

He sat staring at the two duplicate photographic prints. There was no doubt of their compromising nature. That damned photographer had had the luck of the devil. There was Howard L. Chester, locked in Mrs. Drummond’s embrace, his face glued to hers and a look in his eyes that made him appear both frightened and feeble-minded. “Damn and confound the woman,” said Chester out loud, “she’s nothing but a common crook. I wish to heaven I had beat the living daylights out of her that night.”

He took out his writing-case and had slipped one of the prints into an envelope before he realised he had not read Mrs. Drummond’s letter.

“DEAR MR. CHESTER,

“How could you doubt my word? I am sure your friend will confirm that the likeness is excellent and advise you to do as I suggest. I accept your excuse

about urgent business; but you must come back to London to hear my proposition within a month. I do not intend to wait longer.

"Yours ever,

"ISOBEL DRUMMOND."

Still nothing that would weigh with a lawyer, he thought. He stuffed the letter and the remaining print into the case, then addressed the envelope to Stella and sealed it. It would be best to include no letter with the print in case it went astray. He took it down to Franz and said that he wanted it to be expressed to Zürich that evening or first thing in the morning.

"I am going off duty soon, Herr Chester, and I will take it straight to the Hauptbahnhof with pleasure. It will catch the Arlberg express tonight." ~

IX

Mrs. Drummond's Necklace

A WEEK passed and no word came from the Count. So Chester wrote a polite but firm note asking for his decision. There was no reply. Chester spent the time taking walks in the neighbourhood, travelling up and down the railway line to local beauty spots, and otherwise kicking his heels. Only one short trip was made in the 'Steamer', as she had developed a defect in her flash boiler and Mason, with the help of a local mechanic, had only just succeeded in repairing it.

He had written to Stella to keep her posted with the news, and to his agent in London telling him to ship his beloved 'Brünnhilde' direct to Salzburg. Ever since he had first visited Salzburg—which with Vienna were the only cities of Austria he knew—he had wanted to make a balloon ascent from there, then float off down the Salzach valley and make an Alpine crossing somewhere to the south.

As Chester sat in one of the hospitable Bierkellers in the Maria-Theresienstrasse he wondered what he should do if there were no reply from the Count within the next few days. He confessed to himself that he did not like the idea of starting his scandal-tattle in Vienna, although he was determined to go through with it if

necessary to help Peter Melville. But if there was any chance of a more peaceful settlement with the Count, it would certainly be worth waiting for, even at the expense of losing face.

Chester was disturbed, too, at the one unpleasant occurrence after his visit to Terfen. Mrs. Drummond's letter and the duplicate photograph had been stolen from his letter case. He was not certain exactly when this had happened, as he had not looked in that particular pocket of the case until he wrote his last letter to Stella. It was obviously one of the Count's men who had taken it, and Chester thought that the mousy manager was probably the thief. But any of the hotel staff could have taken it, even Franz, although his presence on the upper floors would surely have caused comment. But Chester decided not to say anything, let alone allow it to be thought he suspected the staff. He could not see how the Count could make use of the information, such as it was, although any object of embarrassment would, of course, be welcomed by the enemy.

He strolled back through the lighted arcades and across the old paved streets which now reflected the slanting golden light of the sun. Soon the famous *Alpenglüh*e—the tingeing of pink—would suffuse the northern peaks, which in the evening seemed close and protective above the city.

As he neared the hotel he could see the bustle and confusion of arriving guests, and Chester remembered

the eastbound Arlberg express came in about this time. He wondered idly what the new guests would look like. Picking his way amongst the luggage, he walked in through the glass doors and across the hall to where Franz was turning his beams upon the new arrivals.

As he set foot on the stairway Chester was halted, frozen in his tracks, by an all too familiar voice. His mind could see her through the back of his head as she greeted him like an old friend. He turned.

"What a surprise for me, too," he answered calmly, as he took her hand. "Is this a delightful coincidence or a polite surveillance to see I do not disappear?" he asked.

"My dear Mr. Chester," replied Isobel Drummond, "when my old friend Count von Laufenthal wrote to me recently and said that he had met a friend of mine here, I decided that I myself could combine business with pleasure and pay you both a visit."

"I hope you have a pleasant stay," said Chester and turned back to the stairway.

"I shall, I shall indeed," came her quiet voice after him.

He was sitting with Mason and Julius in his room, having told the outraged Mason what had happened. They discussed the possibility of leaving immediately. It might lose all immediate chance of solving Peter Melville's problem, and therefore play into the Count's hands. But, argued Chester, his next threatening letter to the Count could be as easily despatched from Salzburg, and Salzburg was half-way to Vienna. It would

also help to spike Mrs. Drummond's guns; whatever plans the two were hatching, they would be more difficult to carry out with Chester physically removed from the scene. He did not worry overmuch about Mrs. Drummond's own blackmail of him as he was confident about the outcome of Stella's scheme. Provided he could fend off his tormentor for a week or two, the New York publication would be sure to take place long before she could act. He must, he remembered, write straight away to the Chester agent in Paris with instructions about the blind fund.

So they decided to move, not immediately; but the day after next, after quietly making their arrangements. They would pack early in the morning, pay their bill at about nine and set off straight away.

Chester now felt somewhat relieved; and after writing his letter to Paris, went to bed without dining, and slept soundly.

The next day he and Mason spent away from the hotel, from early morning till late in the evening. They took their meals in the excellent and hospitable restaurants of the city, where even Julius was welcomed, and went for short spins in the 'Steamer' between times. That only allowed the late evening for a possible interruption by Mrs. Drummond, and they would be gone early the next morning, before she or the Court knew what had happened.

Mason and Chester were talking over the final details in his room that night, when there was a tap at the

door and, without waiting for a reply, the manager came in.

"Meine Herren," he started, smoothly and apologetically, "I have come on a most embarrassing errand. A new guest—an English lady named Mrs. Drummond—has lost a most valuable necklace and has obliged me to call the police to investigate. She is a close friend of Count von Laufenthal's and we were powerless to do other than agree with her demand."

Chester said he quite understood, and asked what was required of him.

"Well, mein Herr, the lady has already suggested that the necklace might have been stolen, which, of course, is a terrible accusation. So to stop that at once we are requesting all our guests to be so good as to submit to a routine search of their rooms and luggage. No one need agree if they do not want to; no one can be forced." The little man spread his hands. "But it would save so much unpleasantness," he added.

Chester wondered for a moment if this incident could conceivably be connected with him, but he dismissed the idea immediately. All the same he felt angry that a whole hotel could be commanded by the Count. But there was no point in showing any emotion yet awhile.

"Why, of course," he answered, "we shall be glad to do all we can. Tell the police they can come right in and search everywhere; even our pockets if they like."

The manager sighed with relief and went outside. He

returned with two uniformed policemen, who clearly disliked their task. They apologised for what they were doing every few minutes.

"By the way," asked Chester, "what is the necklace like?"

"Mrs. Drummond has described it as a high collar of silver and diamonds, mein Herr, made, so to say, in a number of hinged panels to fasten closely round the neck."

"Well, that is quite a big affair, and more difficult to hide than a string of pearls or suchlike." The manager nodded but said nothing, keeping his eyes on the two policemen who were at that moment searching the furniture.

Chester watched them for a minute or two and then insisted on one of them searching Mason and himself. Then he helped the man go through all their luggage to his satisfaction.

As he straightened his back from bending over a portmanteau, Chester happened to glance at the manager and intercepted a look and a nod directed at the second policeman who seemed to be standing irresolute in the centre of the room.

What the devil! he said to himself; and immediately sensed danger. What if the necklace had been deliberately placed in the room? Before he could say anything the man went over to the great tiled Ofen and, as if it were only an afterthought, opened the little iron door of the grate. Chester held his breath. So that was it, was

it! But there was nothing in the grate and the policeman stood up empty-handed. He was still looking at the colourful stove. Then he slowly took off his jacket and rolled up his sleeve; bent again; and thrust his arm into the grate and up the flue as far as he could reach.

He withdrew his soot-covered arm, and dangling from his closed hand was a collar of silver and diamonds flashing in the yellow gaslight.

As the man straightened up again, there was silence in the room. Then Julius started his staccato bark of anger. Chester told him to be quiet. The manager had backed against the door and closed it. The policeman who had been searching the luggage looked at his companion with amazement, then at Chester with an expression of sly suspicion. The finder of the collar said nothing, but stood there fingering the jewels.

It was Mason who spoke first. "The damned bitch—I hope she roasts in hell," he almost spat out.

"Steady, Mason, steady," said Chester. "Let's get this straight." He turned to the manager. "And you imagine I put that there, of course?" The two policemen, hearing their own language, seemed to gain confidence and took the matter into their own hands. The one who had found the collar spoke:

"We must ask you to remain here in this room, mein Herr: Such a serious matter must be dealt with by the captain himself." And so without more ado, the two men stalked from the room. The manager quickly removed the key from the door and fairly scuttled out

after them. Then the key was heard grating in the lock and being turned on the outside.

Chester had his hand on Mason's arm and said nothing until they were alone.

"Now I see why she was brought here—by the Count. My God, what a fool I was not to realise what was happening. And our being out all day gave them a perfect chance. What's more, it is no use pointing out we had no time to steal it. They will say that we did it in the night; that Madame had left her door open, and so on."

Mason could only curse and swear like a trooper, and Chester was considerably surprised at his vocabulary. Soon Mason became calmer and the two men sat down to consider what could be done. But it was soon decided that there was nothing they could do—nothing, that is, until the captain arrived. Then, said Chester, he would first try the game he had often seen played in the New York courts. He would ask questions, as many questions as he could, and try and confuse the police at the start. Or if that failed, and if they started treating him like a self-convicted criminal, he would try something else. He had done it once to a dishonest official in South America. He would roar at him and threaten him, with all the arrogance and power of a rich man. Hateful as such a performance might be, it often worked, even if only to gain time for disclosing chinks in the enemy's armour.

They sat for nearly an hour before the door was

unlocked and opened, and a small dapper figure in a green and gold uniform entered. He carried his sheathed sword in his left hand. The two policemen and the manager crowded in behind him. The captain looked intelligent, but carried himself with a slight swagger of authority. He stopped inside the door and looked from Mason to Chester as if expecting them both to rise. Neither did. Chester had lit a cigar and blew a long narrow column of smoke into the air. He was pleased to see that the captain was growing visibly red and angry.

"Herr Chester?" he snapped at last.

"That's me," drawled Chester in German, "have a chair. What can I do for you?" The captain remained standing.

"You will be pleased to treat this matter with seriousness and respect. I have been called here because a very valuable necklace was stolen last night. It is found hidden in your stove here. Do you deny that?"

"Who said it was stolen?"

"Frau Drummond."

"How does she know?"

"Don't be flippant, Herr Chester."

"Don't be credulous, Herr Hauptmann,"

"Do you know I could arrest you for trifling with the police and for insolence?"

Chester was sitting beside a small writing-table. In a lightning-quick movement he raised his left hand and

brought it smashing down on the frail piece of furniture. It was as if a shell had exploded in the room. The captain jumped involuntarily as if he had been jerked on a string, his left hand darting away from his side and up to his chest. The two policemen stepped backwards and collided with the manager, who emitted a cry of pain and astonishment. An inkpot had leapt and toppled off the table, spattering the carpet with blue as it rolled to a stop. Julius had leapt from the bed, scrambled underneath, and taken refuge behind a large blue chamber-pot. Mason alone remained motionless, grinning at the enemy's discomfiture.

Before any of the group could recover, Chester raised his large bulk from the chair and stood towering over the captain; then fairly bawled into the man's face:

"Insolence? Insolence? Let me tell you something, my man. I am an American citizen, and a rich one at that!"

He put up his big hand and solemnly poked the now infuriated captain in the chest. He raised his voice to a roar:

"Just one more piece of insolence from you, and I will have the Polizeiamt in Vienna reduce you to the ranks, and Count von Laufenthal will be powerless to stop it. I will break you; yes, break you," and with these words he crashed his hand down again on the table.

By this time the two policemen were fumbling with their pistol holsters, but stopped and stared idiotically

at Chester at this new demonstration of violence.

The captain seemed to be struggling for breath, his face purple. He was trying to shout, but his voice came out piping and strangled, which seemed to make him even more angry.

Chester's voice rang out again, a little less deafening, but now cracking and peremptory:

"Now, Herr Hauptmann, are you going to behave in a civilised way? or are you going to risk ruin—and—I—*mean—ruin?*"

The wretched man, belittled and browbeaten before his inferiors, seemed now to lose his head. He started pulling at his sword. It stuck.

Chester put his hands on his hips and burst into a roar of laughter:

"Assault and battery will cost you more," he cried. Then with a completely different voice, quiet but clipped, he turned on the manager, who was cowering by the door.

"You, there, go this instant and bring Mrs. Drummond; and come back yourself if you want to keep your job here."

The captain seemed to have taken a grip on himself and had abandoned the attempt to draw his sword. He was still red in the face; there was now shame and fear fighting for possession of his features. He again tried to speak, but the roar of Chester's deep voice drowned him out:

"Now, Herr Hauptmann, consider your position.

Some hysterical woman says she has been robbed. Some damned loony sends for the police. 'The police come. They want to search the place. I *invite* them to come and search me and my room—*invite* them, mark you. Next, I catch that snivelling manager making signs behind my back to one of your men, and the jewellery is then conveniently found in my stove. Then you are sent for. You are being made a fool of, Herr Hauptmann—a complete fool—either by your own men or by Count von Laufenthal. I will prove it. And if anyone dares stand in my way and does not agree to my demands—yes, my demands—to enable me to exculpate myself, not only you but everyone connected with this mean and stinking business will be made the laughing-stock of the police world. The press will have a field day."

This time the captain was allowed time to speak: "Before I arrest you"—he started bravely; but seeing Chester raise his hand by the table, reworded his remark. "Before I take any action, Herr Chester, I will allow you to state your position."

He turned to the two policemen: "Wait outside, until I call."

"Despite your absurd story," said Chester, now in a quiet and conversational tone, "I have not yet had a good look at the necklace. That at least you can allow me without harm."

The captain hesitated, then removed the collar from his pocket: "No," he said, "that can do no harm," and he handed it over.

Chester took it gingerly by the edges, and holding it so, looked up at the captain. He had seen the first chance of a bluff.

"Ah," he exclaimed, "I see that neither you nor your men are really interested in justice; that, as I thought, this whole thing has been staged—criminally staged!"

The captain was getting red again: "What do you mean by that remark?" he asked acidly.

"My dear Herr Hauptmann," and now Chester's words were smooth as silk, "you know perfectly well that all hope of photographing the incriminating fingerprints on that necklace has been ruined by its not being handled with gloves or a handkerchief. They are overlaid by the fingers of your men and yourself. In fact you have deliberately destroyed evidence."

The captain frowned and half closed his eyes: "Fingerprints? Destroying evidence? Whatever are you talking about?" But there was a certain quaver to his voice, and Chester knew that his bluff was succeeding.

"Am I to tell the press that the captain of police in this lovely and popular resort does not employ the fingerprint system? The system which has been in full swing at Scotland Yard since 1901, and presumably in Vienna. That he is ignorant of the process? Or that he deliberately refused to use it?"

"Of course I know of the system, Herr Chester; but here it is not——" his words stumbled as he seemed to realise he was walking into a trap. He was saved from completing the sentence by the door opening.

Mrs. Drummond entered, followed by the manager. She was dressed in a flowing pink *peignoir* and wore a fine air of outrage and hauteur; while the manager cast furtive glances at Chester and the captain, as if to see who was now winning. Chester and Mason rose.

"Why," demanded Mrs. Drummond, "have I been brought here?" She spoke in English and the manager translated.

The captain bowed and explained that he was endeavouring to clear up this unfortunate business; that the collar had been found in this room; and that in fairness to all concerned, he must examine everyone impartially. He invited her to sit down.

"Impartially?" she cried. "Is it not obvious? This man, who tried to become friendly with me in England, and who knew I was coming here, prepares his ground and steals my jewels. Now they are discovered in his room. And you talk of impartiality? The Count shall hear of this," she flung at him imperiously.

Chester was meanwhile examining the jewelled collar, and had fastened the two ends. He smiled.

"Dear Mrs. Drummond, I promise you that the Count will be informed of every detail; but he will also hear how the Herr Hauptmann is doing his duty by questioning all of us, guilty and innocent. As the accused party I too have the right—at least the moral right—to ask questions of my accuser." The manager took it upon himself to translate this for the captain's benefit.

"Ask away," she said, "it will only lead you deeper into trouble."

Chester noticed from the captain's face that he was again hardening in his attitude, probably as a result of this further reference to the Count.

"Herr Hauptmann," he said, "you would do well to remember what I said about the fingerprints, and further——"

The captain stiffened. He interrupted: "No good prints could have been taken from that necklace. You had better ask the lady your questions, if she will allow it, and then we shall proceed to the police station."

Chester suddenly felt sorry for the man, and more sorry for Mrs. Drummond. But she could wait. He knew the captain was trying now not only to do his duty but to weigh his fate between threatening forces. Chester smiled and sat down.

"I am sorry for you, Herr Hauptmann—no, let me finish—your remarks about fingerprints on the necklace reveal your profound ignorance of the science and will be reported verbatim to the authorities in Vienna. Furthermore, if you knew what you claimed to know about the subject, *and* if you were concerned with justice, you would immediately have taken the other proper step."

Again the man faltered: "What step?"

"Simply to order that stove door to be dusted with powder for fingerprints and photographed. You would undoubtedly find some interesting prints, but you

would not find mine. I, of course, could have worn gloves, but the prints you would find would, I assure you, belong to people whose presence in this room would call for explanation."

Before the captain could answer, Mrs. Drummond cut into the conversation with an angry voice: "I insist on knowing what all this talk is about—it is quite outrageous. This man is obviously talking himself out of the crime he has been caught in."

Chester smiled at her.

"After that pretty speech, Mrs. Drummond," he said, "just let me ask my few questions and the police can carry me off to prison without more fuss. First of all, how long have you had this necklace?"

"Why should I tell you that? Not that it matters—I have had it just over five years. My husband gave it to me for a birthday present. What else do you want to know? Its value, I suppose? I have no idea how much diamonds are worth."

"Its value?" asked Chester innocently, "Oh, no, I'm not asking about its value. But I was wondering if you really cared about the thing. Do you wear it often?"

Chester prayed that she would not see where he was heading. He let out his breath in a sigh of relief as she answered:

"Of course I like it, and of course I wear it—often. I shall wear it tomorrow evening at the Count's."

The captain turned to the manager and asked him to translate this exchange. But the recital was interrupted

by a scream from Mrs. Drummond. The captain swung round to see a smiling Chester advancing slowly upon her with the collar held out in front of him.

Pandemonium broke loose. The captain threw himself at Chester; the two policemen burst in from the corridor; Mason went to the rescue of his master; and Julius, seeing Chester attacked, crawled out from under the bed and flew at the first pair of heels he could bite into. They belonged to Mason.

One of the policemen pulled out his pistol and fired into the ceiling. The *mêlée* ceased as if by magic, except for Julius who had lost his head and was still hanging on to Mason's heel, and had drawn blood. Mason cried out and kicked. The poodle gave up, but stood there wagging his tail. Chester picked himself up from the floor, to which he had been thrown by the combined force of the captain and one of his men, together with Mason's weight when he tripped and fell against the struggling group. He was immediately seized by the two men.

"One more move and I shoot," said the policeman, aiming his pistol at Chester.

"Come," said the captain, "enough of this. You are under arrest, Herr Chester."

But Chester, without warning, went limp in the clutches of his two captors, and before they realised what was happening he had slowly subsided to a sitting position on the floor. He knew that a man of his large bulk would present considerable difficulties to any two

or even three men who attempted to lift or drag him away. And he knew that no one would shoot unless there was a struggle. So he simply sat on the floor and burst out laughing. Mason, halted now by the sight of the pistol, looked at his master and grinned.

Then all three of the policemen, captain and men alike, started shouting at Chester and attempting to drag him towards the door. Chester laughed all the more, as the men began gasping with their exertions.

"Herr Hauptmann," he cried, "dear Herr Hauptmann, pray allow me one more question to you and I will come quietly. This is most uncomfortable for me and most undignified for you."

The captain straightened, his face working with rage:

"What is this new caper, Herr Chester? You had better make it a short question, before I send for a squad of men to carry you bodily from this hotel and through the streets."

Chester spoke very quietly: "You did not see what I was doing when the gnädige Frau screamed, or realise why she screamed. Now listen. I will sit on the floor, quiet as a mouse, while you take that necklace and ask Madame to put it on: for that is all I wanted her to do."

The captain hesitated. He was still furiously angry, so Chester spoke again, this time almost in a whisper: "Herr Hauptmann, the fingerprints were bad enough; but if you do not do what I say now, I promise you on the most sacred relics that I will see you cashiered."

He paused, and still the captain hesitated. "You bloody fool! Don't you see the woman is terrified? And why should she be terrified?"

The captain stared at Chester and then shrugged. He turned towards Mrs. Drummond. Then he realised he did not know where the collar was. He snapped out the words: "Where is the jewellery?"

The policeman with the pistol, again keeping Chester covered, stepped to one side and recovered the collar from where it lay by a chair. He gave it to the captain.

"Ask the gnadige Frau to put this collar on," he said to the manager, and at the same time took a step towards Mrs. Drummond. To the captain's visible surprise she backed against the wall, her hands half raised before her.

"No, no," she spluttered.

The captain stopped and looked at the manager. "What is this all about?" he demanded. "Ask her immediately!"

"Do you not observe, Herr Hauptmann," said Chester gently, "that Madame has a noble neck fit for an empress, whose circumference is clearly somewhat greater than the inside of the necklace?"

The captain looked down at the object in his hands and then up at Mrs. Drummond.

"And did you not hear her say," continued Chester, "that she wore the piece frequently?"

"Ach so?" he said, dwelling on the 'so' and making it into a sustained note of comprehension. He was glaring at Mrs. Drummond.

There was silence in the room. Chester heaved himself from the floor and walked up to Mrs. Drummond. No one attempted to stop him.

"You devil!" she said, almost inaudibly, "you clever devil, but by heaven you will pay for it."

"On the contrary, my dear Mrs. Drummond, you will pay. For I will agree not to prefer charges of conspiracy against you only on two conditions—no, now don't interrupt, because the Count will drop you like a hot cake if you get involved with the law, and I don't think the police are bribable, even if they occasionally stretch their duties to oblige him. His own men will do as he tells them, of course, but he would not risk trying to suborn the police, even here. There are other Counts about the district, you know."

She said nothing.

"First, you give me your word that you will send me those photographs—the negative and all the prints—and drop that matter entirely. Second, you leave this city and Austria by the first train tomorrow. Promise me now on both these counts and I will not accuse you, and you can go free. Now, do you promise?"

There was a long moment of silence, before the 'yes' was hissed at him. She moved away from the wall, looking in turn at the men surrounding her.

None of them moved.

Chester turned to the manager: "There was a small package waiting for Madame when she arrived yesterday, was there not?"

The man looked first at Mrs. Drummond, received no aid from her and looked back at Chester. He nodded.

"I thought so," remarked Chester in English. "The Count had thought the scheme up and told you exactly what to do in advance. What a pity he did not ask for your neck measurement. Now you can leave. Open the door for Madame," he added in German, gesturing to the manager.

After Mrs. Drummond had left the room, Chester turned back and faced the captain.

"I am sorry this had to happen," he said, "and that I had to say what I did. But I was almost trapped by my clever friends and I had to defend myself as best I could. I shall make no charges and no complaints. Let us shake hands on it."

The captain, still perplexed and ruffled, managed a faint smile and took Chester's hand. Then his men came forward and did the same.

The captain looked down at the jewelled collar which he still held: "What shall I do with this?" he asked in a tired voice.

"Take it to Count von Laufenthal—it belongs to him—and tell him you believe it was stolen . . . and, by the way, Herr Hauptmann, call in to a jeweller's tomorrow and ask them how much it is worth. Even a vulgar American can recognise paste when he sees it."

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"Did you send that hamper of schnapps to the police

station?" asked Chester as they drove out for a breath of mountain air next morning.

"Yes, sir; I think you are forgiven now."

"It was a case of everyone forgiving everyone else, if you ask me. I'm glad it turned out as it did, because we had far better stay here for the present."

"Yes, Mr. Chester, but to return to the affair of yesterday; do you think that female will keep her word about the photographs?"

"No, Mason, I don't. And it will make it all the funnier when the New York papers turn up in London. I must send her one in case she doesn't see them."

X

Assault on Julius

‘DEAREST STELLA (wrote Chester),

“This letter might easily have been written to you by Mason to announce my demise. For today that scoundrelly Count tried to murder me—at any rate he or one of his minions did. Instead they hit poor Julius; but mercifully it is not serious. He is reclining on my bed at this moment exactly like a canine diva, with a sash of bandages round his chest, his black curly head on the pillow and that inane grin on his face. He has never had so much fuss made of him in his life, what with every member of the hotel staff lining up outside the door to come in and have a sight of him. The last visitor—our chambermaid Gretl—has just gone out muttering over and over again ‘Der arme Yoolius, der arme Yoolius,’ as if the wretch was at death’s door.

“But this levity is, I admit, reaction to fear and rage on my part; and his Countship had better watch out from now on. Peter or no Peter I am going to get my own back, even if it is only to bribe the Count’s servants to make him apple-pie beds for a week. What I would really like to do is to horsewhip him in true Yankee style. But seriously, I take

your warning to heart from now on. Here's what happened.

"It had been raining for some days after we had outwitted the Count over the jewellery affair—you should have got my account of that by now—and we had stayed indoors most of the time, with a visit or two to some celebrated Bierkeller and Weinstuben. But I had asked Franz about drives in the neighbourhood to while away the time, and he said that the Achensee was one of the finest lakes in the world and I ought to see it. It was to be a full day's outing, and the idea appealed to me. That was on the first rainy day. The rain went on, as I said, but yesterday dawned blue and serene, and we decided to set off in the 'Steamer' directly after breakfast; 'we' being Mason, Julius and myself.

"I don't know whether you know the Achensee; but you go along the floor of the Inn valley as far as Jenbach, which is about twenty-five miles and a mighty pretty drive, what with the mountains and all. Then at Jenbach you have a choice of a rack and pinion railway up the mountains and through a gap to the lake above; or a devilish steep and winding road, for about four and a half miles. Now I had been warned of this road by Franz; but with hill climbing a particular parlour trick of my 'Steamer' I wasn't going to pass up that chance. And I said as much. I boasted to Franz that the car would climb anything they could show me around here, provided

there was a track wide enough for our wheels. And it's true, too.*

"So off we went in fine style in our usual places—Mason and I in front and Julius in lordly isolation on the back seat. But when we arrived at Jenbach, which is a lovely place of colour-washed buildings and great overhanging roofs, I took one look at that little railway they have there, and saw what a fine job of engineering it was. Of course, I wanted to go up in it. But then Mason said we would have to confess to Franz—he hates Franz by the way—that we had taken the railway, and that would have been terribly *infra dig*. So, for the honour of the Chester 'Silver Steamer' and its crew, the equipage set sail, although there would be nothing to *prove* to the wretched Franz that we had been up anyway. After a fair climb at first, the road really did begin to rear up, but the 'Steamer' took it all in her stride. We had nearly reached a village called Eben, and the learned Mason was telling me that the tomb of St. Nothburga is there (whoever she might be), when the road began running through a thick pine forest. The gradient had now become fearsome, but the road kept straight and we could see well ahead. So in order to see what our lady would do, I opened up the throttle. If a steam-car has enough head of steam, she will fairly shoot up even a hill like that. And shoot we did. But so did someone else.

"There was a sharp crack away amongst the trees on

our right, and a wild yelp from Julius. Without any conscious thought I pushed the throttle even farther forward, whilst catching a faint puff of smoke out of the corner of my eye. We seemed to go up that hill like a rocket. I was dimly aware that Mason was leaning back to look after Julius, but neither of us spoke till we came to the top of the rise and were well on the way round the next bend. I figured we were sufficiently out of sight and range by then, and I pulled up.

"Mason, bless his heart, had by that time managed to climb over our seat into the back and was holding Julius in his arms.. After that first yelp, the poor animal had been emitting little whines, which at least showed he wasn't dead. We stretched him out on the seat and had difficulty in holding him still, as he was trying to lick my face. Mason pointed to a patch of blood just below the shoulders. Luckily he is cropped there, and I could see the actual wound quite easily. By a miracle the bullet had only grazed him and taken off the skin; but it was nasty. So I made a pad of my handkerchief and tore up my dust-coat so we could bind it tightly on to him. We dared not go in search of water to wash the wound as, for all I knew, there might be an army of sharpshooters still crouching in ambush for us. So as soon as Julius was fixed up and lying in Mason's arms, I drove on as fast as I could to Eben. We got the innkeeper there to give us water and some kind of salve, and we did a

better job of bandaging our friend. The innkeeper seemed quite 'incredulous when I answered that my dog had been shot. 'Erschossen?' he said, 'unmöglich!' as if we were a troupe of clowns. We let him believe it was 'unmöglich', and said no more.

"However, shot he was, and as we started considering our position I began to boil with rage. But the immediate problem was to get away and keep clear of our unpleasant opponents in the woods. I knew we might possibly risk heading downhill and trusting to our speed to get us past another ambush. But I went quite cold as I realised the marksman must have realised he had missed me, and also realised we would have to come down the same way home; unless we were to go hundreds of kilometres north through Bavaria. That meant they might try anything, even a road 'obstruction to pull us up and so make me an easy target. It was Mason who came to the rescue when I put these points to him. He said he was sure the little mountain railway had one or two stations on the way up between Jenbach and the lake. So I asked the innkeeper, and sure enough there was a station at Eben itself, just by the village.

"Our host agreed to look after the 'Steamer' for that night, and we set off for the station. We must have looked an absurd sight, with Julius in my arms, and Mason in his motoring cap and coat. But it was nothing to the sensation we caused when the funny little train came hissing into the station, where we

had had, incidentally, to wait over half an hour. It was full of tourists of all nations, and the amount of condolence and dog noises and sympathy which were heaped upon us as we chugged almost vertically down between the fir trees served to keep our more serious thoughts at bay until we were waiting quietly on Jenbach station, waiting for the local train to Innsbruck.

"The first question that posed itself was: How did the Count know we were motoring to the Achensee? For I had ruled out the possibility of the shot being accidental: it was, after all, a bullet—not bird-shot. The answer was simple: Franz. He was the only person who knew sufficiently long beforehand where we were going, and that we were making the climb up from Jenbach in the 'Steamer', and not by rail. There was ample time to get word to the Count, and for him to post his man or men to wait for us. So we knew for certain that Franz was in the Count's pay, or at least that he was prepared to hand on information if it was worth his while. It now also seemed clear that it was Franz who engineered the search of my baggage and the theft of Mrs. D's letter and the photo. I did just consider that possibility before, but not very seriously. It seemed such a dangerous game for him to play: but it must have been him. And I have been paying him handsomely at that! I was obviously outbid. But I am determined now to try the further effect of money, and see if the bought can be out-bought.

"Next, why did they miss such a sitting target? I soon realised that from their point of view we were far from sitting. The huntsmen of these parts are used to the walk and bound of their quarry and can estimate it. But the man they sent after me could only get as far as realising that a motor-car goes slowly up hills. He never reckoned with a steam-car's speed up-hill and its acceleration. But all the same, he was a damned good marksman and only just missed.

"I can write all this in a reasonably calm way, for my anger at the Count—which was red-hot yesterday—has now cooled to a grim determination to get my own back. That may seem childish, but I have never been shot at before. The recent Drummond business exasperated me; but assaults on one's own skin are enraging.

"When we got back to Innsbruck we were unaccountably met by quite a crowd and they all seemed to know that we had been victims of a hunting accident. That was good generalship on the Count's part. His men must have telegraphed—they would have had plenty of time—and had the story put about at the station to forestall whatever tale we had to tell.

"Back in the hotel, Franz was the very personification of solicitude. As I had already decided to pretend I did not suspect him, I played up to him and even encouraged the fuss which he and all the others made of Julius.

"Well, it's all over for the minute. I feel the whole

thing is rather like a boxing match, with poor Gabriele as the prize money. Round one, indecisive; round two to the Count; round three to me; and so on. It started with the belief on both sides that the bout would be decided on points, but now it can only end in a knock-out.

"I will write again when there is news—or else Mason will!

"Yours ever,
"HOWARD."

XI

The Count Is Not Interested

ONE of the first practical results of the ambush was to make Chester write again to the Count, this time saying that unless he had an answer immediately he would be obliged to carry out his plan of action. He took the letter down to Franz and asked what was the easiest way of having it delivered.

"Leave that to me, mein Herr," said Franz, grandly, "I will have it conveyed to his Excellency without delay."

Chester looked him straight in the eye and wondered if it were worth risking a scathing remark about the Count having eyes, ears and pairs of hands in the most unlikely places; but he decided against it. He smiled:

"Excellent, Franz; I shall be much obliged if you would."

Since Mrs. Drummond's departure—flight was how Chester liked to think of it—the service at the hotel had been superlative. Chester felt that however strong the Count was in the neighbourhood, and, however many people in the hotel took his money, the recent triumph of the *nouveau riche*, American had impressed them considerably. He had also had a civil note from the captain of police thanking him for the schnapps.

Chester felt that all was well, at least for the moment.

But his heightened spirits were lowered to bedrock soon after seven that evening, when a letter was delivered to him at his table in the hotel. It bore a crest on the flap of the envelope and inside was a single small sheet bearing the same device—the phoenix. It also carried three curt lines of handwriting in a neat clerical script:

“Count von Laufenthal acknowledges Mr. Howard L. Chester’s letter, the contents of which have no interest for the Count.”

Chester picked up his tankard and drank. He put it down, took up the letter again and turned it over. Well, he thought, that—for the time being—is that. Such an uncompromising note means only one thing; that he has somehow squared Herr Loder. He felt sure this was what had happened, rather than that the Count was taking a chance on the scandal misfiring.

He got up and went out to Franz, who was preparing to hand over to the night porter.

“Franz, I want to send an urgent telegram to Vienna: can you take it down to the station on your way home?”

Franz assured him he would be delighted, and Chester wrote out an instruction to the firm’s agent in Vienna to meet him in Salzburg in two days’ time.

Franz was just ponderously placing the piece of paper in his note-case when he seemed to remember something.

“Herr Chester, have you seen the piece about yourself

in the late paper today, the local Innsbruck one?" He reached under the counter as he spoke.

Chester pretended a calm he did not feel, being certain that here was the beginning of the Count's next move. "No," he said airily. "What on earth does it say? I did not know I was of interest to the newspapers of this city."

"Ah, but the piece emanates from Salzburg," said Franz, spreading the sheets before him. He slowly turned them over with a tongue-wetted finger, searching each column as he went. "Ah!" he exclaimed, and turned the paper round for Chester to read:

"It is reported this morning from Salzburg that the well-known American industrialist, Howard L. Chester, has had his private balloon sent to that city from London, where he is an Honorary Member of the Aero Club. It is expected that Herr Chester will make an ascent in the near future and so win the distinction of being the second aeronaut who has made a balloon flight from Salzburg in a century. It is believed that Herr Chester is at present in Innsbruck, where he arrived from England in the latest model of the steam-car which his firm produces in America."

"Well, well, it seems that news travels fast around here," commented Chester, "I suppose the Customs or the railway officials gave the tip to the local press."

"Is it true then, Herr Chester, that you are an aeronaut and that you will make a flight here in Austria?" Franz was feigning exaggerated interest.

"Why, yes; it is true—that is to say, if I can get a good wind from the north and so float down toward Hallein. I have always wanted to see mountains from the air," he added.

"That will be a great day, Herr Chester, a great day," and Franz stuffed the newspaper back under the counter and prepared to leave for the station.

Chester walked slowly up the stairs and went to Mason's room where Julius was being fed. Chester told him the news, and added:

"We start tomorrow for Salzburg at the crack of dawn, Mason."

Mason nodded and then looked at Chester:

"What do you plan on doing now, sir?"

"I don't know, Mason, I don't know. I feel sure that Loder has been squared by the Count. Probably been given a large sum of money. I should look a pretty fool to start that scandal and have it revealed that the Count has dealt fairly with him now, even if it is after all those years of ruin. It is an extraordinary thing, Mason; I never reckoned on that one solution from the Count's point of view. Yet now it seems obvious. It means that I must have scared him more than I realised. But that is poor comfort at the moment."

"Can you be quite certain about Loder being squared, sir?"

"Well, to be exact, no. But that slam-down note after he had at least said he would think it over looks to me like a certainty. However, I shall get Morton to

investigate in Vienna and make sure. As our agent he would know everyone and be able to get a bearing on friend Loder."

He sat down and took Julius on to his knees: "The curious thing is that the whole scheme of starting that scandal in Vienna seems now somewhat visionary. When I look back on it all I am surprised at how I saw it as a direct and effective attack on the Count, without realising what a business it would be getting the rumours started in the right places. Mind you, I would have done it, no matter what it might have cost. I had even thought for a time that I could have anonymous pamphlets printed and sent to strategic places. But the methods of society gossip would have been better. Morton could have been the spearhead, as he has amazingly high connections in Viennese society—I don't know how he has done it. But it would have been rather unfair to involve him so deeply, all the same."

Chester lay back in the deep arm-chair and looked at the white plaster ceiling.

"I am so depressed, Mason, that the whole caboodle seems incredible to me. Even my hatred of the Count seems unreal. I feel almost well out of it. But immediately I say that, the idea of those two young people comes back to me and I simply must do something. My own scores against the Count make it easier for me to go ahead, I admit. But I wish to heaven that I could think of a simple way to get at the scoundrel."

"Don't you worry, sir. We'll think of something as

we go along tomorrow. For my part I should like to deal him out some of his own medicine."

"What on earth do you mean, Mason?"

"Oh, I don't know, sir, exactly. Ambush him, or threaten him, or get him involved so deep in some trouble that he would have to agree to terms. I wish one of his robber band would murder someone—apart from us—and that we could engineer it that he was suspected. That would be grand, sir, wouldn't it?"

"Grand, but as far from possibility as we are from the moon."

"Well, sir, as I say, we mustn't give up hope. Something will turn up, I'm sure—and," he added, "I am sure Miss Barrington would have some excellent suggestion," Mason paused: then, almost shyly for him, he said: "Miss Barrington is, if I may say so, sir, an excellent woman in every respect."

Julius Barks

AS Franz and the manager bowed them out into the sunshine and aboard the 'Steamer' early next morning, Chester wondered if he would ever see the unholy pair again. He bore them no grudge—grudges were reserved for the Count—but he felt he would have liked to play some thought-going practical joke on them. He wanted above all to make fools of them. "Must be arriving at my second childhood," he said to himself as he took the wheel. He looked up for the last time at the golden-rayed sun surrounded by its finely-wrought iron frame; raised his hand in farewell; and, as Franz and his black-suited master started bowing again, gently pushed forward the throttle. The 'Silver Steamer' slid away from the hotel and Chester felt as if he were moving into purer air with every turn of the tyres.

Once beyond the city Chester let the car out to an even thirty miles an hour and settled back to enjoy the journey. Not even the distant sight of Schloss Terfen could spoil his mood as he drew Mason's attention to its white walls looking out from the protective firs on the mountain-side.

"With this neighbourhood behind us, Mason, I feel we have shaken off the Count for good. I'm only kidding myself about that really, of course. I know we shall

have to make another charge at the enemy, but not—thank the stars—on this home territory of his.”

All through the morning they rode serenely through the mountain grandeur of the Tyrol, occasionally pulling up to admire some particularly fine view, and stopping for lunch at a little wayside inn beyond Zell am See, with geraniums boxed beneath every window and a life-size painting on the wall of St. Florian emptying his usual bucket of water on a burning house.

It was nearly four o'clock when they rounded a bend in the road and first caught sight of a sunlit castle perched high on its own private rocky eminence, which reared straight up from the massed fir trees which here carpeted the valley.

“My goodness gracious, what a romantic place! Mason, we simply must stop here for a spell. We're in good time, and this is the sort of castle that will take the bad taste of Terfen out of my mouth.”

Chester was not driving at the moment and he gazed up at the castle with its bright red shutters and candle-snuffer turrets.

“I wonder what it's called,” he said, and at that moment saw the round wooden sign standing out of the roadside bearing the single word WERFEN.

“Oh, yes, I have heard of Werfen,” he said; “it's rhyming with Terfen is a good sign. I am sure this place will exorcise the ‘deathschloss’ . . . Mason, slow up to a trot, will you, so we don't pass the road up to this lucky castle.”

They soon came to where a white track rose abruptly to the left and went soaring out of sight between the firs. Mason steered the 'Steamer' close into the side of the road and shut off the burners.

"I'll stay here, sir, if you don't mind. I should be out of breath in five minutes on that path. It looks like climbing the side of a house."

"You lazy old son of a gun! All right, stay here if you like; but you'll be missing a lot. Come, Julius, this is the only exercise you'll get today."

The poodle waited for Chester to open the rear door and then jumped down in leisurely fashion; he stretched himself, yawned, and looked up at Chester with his tail performing a slow wag.

With Julius trotting ahead, Chester set off up the winding track, and soon he felt as if he were in another and mysterious world. The afternoon sun glanced through the upper branches of the massed firs, and the sky above was a deep and luminous azure. For some reason which he could not fathom, the peaceful scene—with the invisible castle somewhere above him—reminded him of Grimm's fairy tales, none of which he could remember accurately, and the name Grimm took him straight back in mind to the grim story of Schloss Terfen. "Damn that place," he muttered, "everything reminds me of it." He strode on now somewhat irritated, until ahead of him appeared an arched stone gateway with its iron gates shut tight. He went up to them and looked through into a cheerful courtyard,

bright with flower-boxes and the red shutters flanking the deep stone windows.

He pulled the rusty bell-handle. He heard a door opened; and, soon after, a bent old man came into view and shuffled up to the gates. He wore some sort of faded uniform, like a steward, Chester thought.

"What can I do for the Herr?" he asked in a gentle voice.

Chester said that if it were at all possible he would like to see over the castle. But it seemed that was not allowed. The old man explained very politely that the Count, his master, was in residence and did not like tourists entering the castle if he was at home.

"Oh, I quite understand," replied Chester. "But is it possible to get a view of the castle and of the valley from anywhere up here?"

"Oh, indeed, mein Herr; a most beautiful view can be obtained if you follow this path up there to the right." He slowly raised his hand and pointed. "The Herr will then come out upon a small bluff, with the castle itself rising behind him, and the valley laid out below."

Thanking the old man and calling to Julius he took the path, and in a few minutes of stiff walking, reached the promised bluff.

It proved, indeed, a wonderful vantage-point, and Chester sat down on the grass to gaze at the peaceful scene below. Again the idea of Grimm's fairy tales occurred to him; again the association led straight to

Schloss Terfen. Chester let the thoughts remain this time, and idly called to mind his visit there. Once more the slight and irritating sensation possessed him of something being wrong about that suicide story. He stood again in imagination beside the big carved bed in the chamber where the couple had died, re-creating in his mind the terrible scene.

As he sat there pleasantly warmed by the afternoon sunshine, he heard—as if from another life—a dog barking. Before he fully realised it was Julius, the rhythm of the barks seemed to chime with his thoughts. He suddenly found himself stupidly staring into the almond eyes of the poodle, who was sitting on his haunches with his head on one side. Bark, yelp, bark, went Julius; bark, yelp, bark, as he did when he was puzzled and demanded Chester's attention.

But Chester was only conscious of the dog for a moment. Then he was back in the bedroom at Schloss Terfen. Not at the head of the bed, as he had been just now, but standing inside the door, staring at two frightened figures in the bed. Bark, yelp, bark; shot, cry, shot.

"My holy aunt!" exclaimed Chester, as Julius barked again and got up expectantly with his tail wagging. "My holy, sainted aunt! I've got it! That affair was no suicide pact; it was a double murder. Oh, what a fool I was. What a complete and cockeyed fool! Of course there was something wrong with that story—everything in the world was wrong with it."

He continued talking, now quietly, to himself; and Julius, finding he attracted no notice, went sniffing off by the old lichen-covered wall.

"Shot, cry, shot. It was a woman's cry; that old woman had said *scream*. Shot, scream, shot. How in heaven's name could she scream after one shot through the heart, and the pistol being in her lover's hand? He would first shoot her, then himself. But in between the two shots there had been a scream. Which meant that the woman died last. And she died last for the simple reason that someone else first shot her lover and then shot her; and she had screamed before she died. That old housekeeper had been quite definite about the order of events. Murder it was, without a shadow of a doubt. Murder."

Chester found that he was sitting bolt upright and tingling with excitement. Murder, he thought, probably by the husband who later killed himself. The wretched man must have waited for them to set off from Salzburg or Vienna and followed them to Terfen. With only two old people and a boy in the castle, he could easily have got into the place without being seen.

But it took some minutes for Chester to realise why he was so excited. It was not only the solution of his doubt, but a heaven-sent and simple way to force the Count to give up Gabriele. But first he must make quite certain of his ground. He would go straight back to Terfen and get the old woman to repeat her story. He would tip her outrageously and persuade her to go over

the events of that important night again. Then he would hold the threat of disclosure over the Count.

Chester stood up and stretched. As he surveyed the peaceful valley scene below him and the sharp grey mountains rising on either side, he felt a pleasant tingling sensation in his back. Then he laughed. Life was getting back into focus again, he thought; it had become very blurred at times during the past month. He was pleased at gaining on the Count, and admitted to himself a primitive satisfaction in revenge. Peter Melville and Gabriele swam into his newly-ascending mood and he felt a little guilty at not having kept them continually and chivalrously in the forefront of his mind.

As he picked his way down the path, oblivious of the quietly brooding castle above him and the heat of the afternoon sun filtering through the trees, his mind careered over the possibilities which were now opened up by this new discovery. Only for a moment did he wonder if the old guardian of Schloss Terfen had remembered aright what she had heard as she lay there in bed thinking of the young couple. He felt sure she was right: she must be right, he told himself hopefully.

He started again to picture the so-called suicide, this time allowing his imagination to follow the aftermath of the scene. What had the old couple done after finding the bodies? Did they raise the alarm, and if so whom did they summon? Was it first a doctor? Chester's spirit gave another leap. A doctor! Instantly

a memory from New York flew in to link that word with murder. He remembered reading about a case where some man was shot at point-blank range, and the police had found black powder burns all round the wound. If the Terfen tragedy had been a suicide pact there would be the same telltale powder marks on the nightdresses of each; and the doctor—if doctor had been summoned—would have noticed them at once.

He would find out from the old woman if there had been a doctor and, if so, run him to earth and either bribe or trick him into telling the truth. If no powder marks were noticed then it was murder right enough.

As he emerged from the forest path into the glaring sunshine he saw Mason dozing over the 'Steamer's' steering-wheel, despite the presence of two villagers who were walking cautiously round the car as if it might explode or ascend into heaven at any moment.

Julius started barking at the intruders—to which they paid no attention—and Chester called out: "Mason!"

Mason blinked and looked about him.

"Mason!" cried Chester again, "I've great news! Up there on that perch I had an inspiration—I think we've got the Count where we want him."

Mason still looked a little dazed as the obviously excited Chester leant over the 'Steamer's' door and wagged a finger at him, saying dramatically:

"There's a murder in the family, Mason, a murder!"

Mason blinked and repeated the word, and wondered what his master was talking about.

"The Terfen couple—the Count's son," went on Chester. "It wasn't suicide unless I'm a Dutchman," and he went on to tell Mason the story.

"And what's more, it was our Julius taking revenge on the Count, too. It was his doing his dot-and-carry-one bark up there that chimed in with my thoughts about Terfen and suddenly made me see daylight. I feel like a million dollars, and it's back to Terfen for me, Mason, as fast as I can make it."

The two villagers, who had taken up observation posts well astern of the 'Steamer', now witnessed what they must have felt as the typical lunacy of rich tourists with new-fangled motor-cars. For Chester and Mason began unpacking bags and cases and selecting a minimum of luggage for Chester to take with him. This was piled into a small bag, and the rest stowed untidily beside Julius on the rear seat as well as all over the floor.

Chester called out to the two natives, asking them how far the nearest railroad station was, as he supposed that such a small Burg as Werfen did not rate a station to itself. But one of the men said that there was in fact a station and—on hearing that Chester's destination was Jenbach—volunteered the information that a train going back west was due just after five o'clock. He then gave directions to Chester, and the 'Steamer' was off.

As there was an hour to wait, Mason and Julius were sent on their way to Salzburg where they were to instal themselves in the Hotel Goldenes Schiff and await developments.

Chester went back to Jenbach in what little state the local Eilzug could rise to, which was a musty and cushiony first-class compartment which reminded him of the antique satin-upholstered carriage his grandmother used to use in New York. But the evening panorama of trees and rivers and mountains kept his eyes and part of his mind entertained, and he passed the time in mildly abated impatience.

The station platform at Jenbach seemed very still and peaceful after the rattle of the journey. The dark mountains rose behind him, with their memories of the Count's attempt on his life and the serio-comic descent in the precipitous railway with the wounded Julius. The red tail-light of the train was disappearing in the distance towards Innsbruck before Chester stopped gazing at the moonlit peaks across the valley and turned to leave. He settled for a large bare room with a double bed in the station hotel, and went downstairs for a meal of cheese rolls and wine in the cheerful warmth of the Bierkeller.

Next morning the innkeeper sent a small brown-legged boy to summon the only hireable carriage in the place; and soon after ten o'clock Chester was jogging along on his way to Schloss Terfen, listening with some amusement to his garrulous driver's embroidered description of the neighbourhood.

Chester had no eyes for the landscape that morning; he was too busy with his thoughts and hopes. As he became aware of the last steep ascent to the Castle he

started to pay some attention to his cabby's comments on the tragedy, Chester cut into the old man's narrative:

"Were you here at the time?" he asked.

"Why, God bless my soul, mein Herr, of course I was! It was I who drove the doctor up at midnight."

"That must have been a terrible time for everyone," commented Chester as casually as his rising excitement would allow: "and who would the doctor be?"

"Why, it was old Dr. Haller—he's dead now, God rest his soul. He died——"

Chester gasped: "Died?"

"Yes, indeed, mein Herr; he died three years ago last January—a proper fine man he was, and trusted by all, both the nobility and the common folk."

From his rising elation Chester fell like a damp rocket. He slumped on the hot cushions of the carriage and swore to himself like a dockside navvy. As the carriage came to a standstill inside the courtyard he caught sight of the guardian of Terfen beating a large carpet hung on a line.

The woman was looking towards him, but still beating her carpet as he got down from the carriage and came towards her. Leaning against the faded wall was her surly-looking son, one foot tapping time lazily to his mother's strokes. He, too, looked at Chester but went on tapping.

Chester raised his straw hat and said good morning: "I expect you are surprised to see me again," he smiled.

The woman stopped beating her carpet, and even smiled back—evidently remembering the gold coins.

"The truth is that I was so affected by your story of the tragedy here that I felt I must visit the scene again. You see, I am writing a book about Austria and although the story is to be found in other books, I want to tell it in greater detail."

The woman nodded and said she would be pleased to show him the room again. They began to walk slowly across the courtyard towards the wooden stairway, Chester meanwhile selecting a gold coin from his pocket and passing it to her casually as they went. Chester looked round him and tried to absorb as much detail of the place as he could. His eye roamed over the ancient building and up over the roofs to the fir trees mounting to the heights above.

"What more do you want to know?" she asked as they entered the cool stone hall and the door closed behind them.

"I just wanted to go over the whole story again, so that I can get it quite clear in my mind. And I cannot help a desire to see the room again."

With which Chester repeated the events of the evening as he could remember them, asking her if he was correct and adding questions about various details as he progressed. He wanted to put her at her ease so that the more important enquiries he was saving up would seem to fit naturally on to the earlier and more innocent ones.

When they reached the bedroom, Chester paused and pointed upwards:

"You and your husband were in your bedroom on the floor above, and you would have to come down the stairway we have just used?"

"Yes, gnä' Herr, our room was not above this room; it was some way along. But it was very easy to hear the shots, as all the windows are on the same side."

"Ah, yes, the shots," exclaimed Chester as if just remembering them. By this time he was inside the room looking thoughtfully at the carved bed.

"You remember the order of them distinctly, don't you—a shot, a scream, and then the second shot?"

The woman nodded.

"Poor woman," said Chester, anxious to allay any suspicions he may have aroused: "She must have had just enough breath to cry out after she was hit—that often happens you know," he lied. "It was a woman's scream, wasn't it?" he added.

"Oh, yes, it was her all right. I never thought before of what you describe, but of course it must have been so. The second shot was the one the master aimed at himself."

"You came straight down with your husband after hearing the shots?"

"Yes, we were puzzled and frightened for a minute or two, then we hurried downstairs just as we were, in our night-clothes—it was a very warm night—and came in here."

"How exactly were the couple lying when you found them? You yourself came in with your husband?"

"Oh, yes, I came right in." She paused, staring first at the wooden floor, then at the bed, trying to re-create the scene she had witnessed. Then she walked to the left side of the bed and pointed:

"The young lady was lying here on this side, and the master had fallen across her with his head almost over the side of the bed."

"And the pistol?"

"It was clutched in his left hand—his arm was dangling down towards the floor and the pistol was almost touching it."

"And the wounds?" asked Chester quietly. He knew he was now treading on dangerous ground: "I don't expect you remember such unpleasant details."

"Oh, indeed, yes. I can never forget it: the master's wound was plain to see—in his side, high up near his armpit."

Chester found it hard to conceal his excitement: "And the lady?"

"My husband had to lift the master off to see if she were dead. She was—with a bullet in her heart."

Chester felt certain of his ground now, but he went on, again as casually as he could:

"Did you notice if the bullet holes were clean? Or were there a lot of black marks round the holes on the night-clothes?"

"I cannot remember that, mein Herr; I was too upset.

But I don't think their night-clothes were dirty in the way you say."

That was enough for now, thought Chester. He thanked her for all her trouble, and started to move towards the door, noticing again the little vase of fresh flowers on the table.

"By the way, why wasn't the door locked?"

"Oh, our doors here were never locked then—who was there to intrude, *gnä' Herr?*"

Who indeed, wondered Chester. As they went slowly down the great stone stairway he was adding the last details to what he believed the true story. The murderer had opened the door, bringing him immediately face to face with the couple on the bed—which was 'feet on' to the door and directly opposite. The young man must have seen the pistol at once, and seen it aimed at his mistress. He had tried to fling himself across her body to protect her, and received the bullet in his left side. He would almost certainly have sunk back on to the bed, leaving her again in full view of the murderer. She had had time to scream before the second shot killed her, possibly as she half rose in the bed. That was almost certainly the sequence of events. Then the murderer had only to drag the young Count over the body of his mistress and clasp his fingers over the pistol.

As they stood in the hall, Chester thanked her again and gave her a second twenty-kronen piece.

"The Herr is very generous," she murmured.

"Not at all, not at all," said Chester. "It must have been a terrible experience for you and your husband—I suppose you sent for Dr. Haller immediately?"

She suddenly looked at him with suspicion in her eyes; but by now he was past caring about being discreet.

"You know his name?" she asked.

"Why, yes; the coachman told me coming up here today. He said the doctor had been dead some years."

"Ah, that is how you knew. 'Yes, he is dead now, a much beloved man.'"

Then a question suddenly swam into Chester's mind:

"Was the doctor married?" he asked.

"Yes; the Frau Doktor went to live with her bed-ridden sister in Rattenberg," came the welcome answer.

It was a forlorn hope, but Chester determined to have a talk with the wife as soon as he could get to Rattenberg, which he remembered was only a few miles down the Inn valley.

As they emerged into the bright sunlight of the courtyard Chester saw the boy rather aimlessly beating the carpet. He stopped when he heard their steps on the stairway. Chester was surprised at what a relief he felt at seeing the ageing plaster of the walls, the blue of the sky above and the wall of tree-covered rock towering above them. There was no wind, and the place seemed to be possessed by a deep hush in keeping with its hidden tragedy. It was curious and now almost menacing to think that what had seemed to the world a romantic suicide pact had in reality been a sordid and

ruthless murder. No wonder Herr Rechtlin had shot himself afterwards. Chester pictured the unfortunate man—the discovery of his wife's faithlessness, of her lover's identity; and the dogged following of the couple to their remote mountain retreat; and of his final revenge in the stillness of that hot summer's night. The tragedy had run full cycle, and it was a wretched tale to unfold after all these years. But there would be no need for anyone but the Count to know it if he behaved properly and gave Gabriele her freedom.

It was with a confident heart that Chester mounted the ancient carriage and was borne off down the steep track from Terfen to the valley and back to Jenbach. This time he not only listened to the coachman, but pumped him.

"Did the husband of the Terfen housekeeper come down from the Castle to summon Dr. Haller?" he asked.

"Yes, mein Herr. The doctor's carriage was having a new wheel fitted, so I took them both up."

"Did you wait up at the Castle for long?"

"Oh, yes, the doctor decided to wait for the Count—we had sent a messenger on horseback for him—the telegraph doesn't work at that hour—so I waited too. Kicked my heels in the courtyard until Anna—that's the housekeeper—brought me some beer. She was crying so much I thought the beer would be spoiled. Then I was allowed in the kitchen and dozed there."

"What time did the Count arrive?"

"Can't say I remember exactly—some time about three or four in the morning."

"Did you see him when he came?"

"Yes, there was a great to-do. He arrived with his chief steward and one of the huntsmen. I came out as they were dismounting in the courtyard. The Count looked a terrible sight——"

"How do you mean?"

"He looked almost dead. He didn't seem to notice anyone, and walked as if he were in a dream: and he looked twenty years older than his age. I was really shocked, mein Herr, really shocked."

As Chester dismounted outside the Station Hotel in Jenbach, he thought of one more question he had meant to ask the housekeeper:

"Where were the unhappy couple buried?"

"In the little cemetery at Ansbach, near the Laufenthal tombs, or rather—seeing they were suicides and seeing that suicide is not allowed by Holy Mother Church—in a little plot of ground the Count bought adjoining the churchyard, but not consecrated ground, you understand."

"Well," said Chester, "it has been a most interesting journey—have a bottle of wine on the change," and gave him a tip large enough to buy a cask.

An hour later Chester was leaning out of the window of the local east-bound train, bound for Rattenberg, and watching a rain-storm move down over the mountains like a soft grey curtain.

XIII

Chester Sends an Ultimatum

"FRAU DOKTOR HALLER?" repeated the hall porter of the Roter Adler. He lifted his eyes and spread his hands on the counter: "I am somewhat new here, mein Herr, although that name seems familiar. I will ask the manager."

Chester had booked a comfortable room in the picturesque inn, chosen because he admired the fine wrought iron sign hanging outside—showing the red eagle with wings outstretched—which was one of the minor beauties of Rattenberg.

The manager emerged from a small room down the corridor, and came forth beaming:

"But of course, Herr Chester, Frau Doktor Haller lives with her sister, Frau Steiner, in the Adamgasse. You are a friend of the Frau Doktor's?"

"No, I'm not a friend; but I have met a friend of her late husband's in New York, who asked me to convey his respects if ever I was in this part of the country." He didn't want to rouse more suspicions than he need: therefore, he thought, one must lie, and lie convincingly.

"Ah, that is most interesting; the two ladies live at number eleven."

Chester thanked the man, saying he had to leave

Rattenberg early next morning, so he must risk disturbing them now. And off he went.

The house, with its blue front door, appeared to be more modern than its neighbours and Chester thought it was a pleasant enough retreat for two old ladies. He hoped he would not upset the Frau Doktor too much, but the clues were now too strong for him to leave this part of the case unfollowed. In answer to his pull on the bell the door was soon afterwards opened by a woman in her sixties—or so he thought—who had a face of strong features only softened by very large and gentle eyes.

"Have I the honour of speaking to Frau Doktor Haller?" he asked.

She smiled: "Yes, mein Herr, that is my name. What is it that you wish?" She stood quietly where she was, with one hand on the door.

"I am an American, gnädige Frau—as you can probably tell from my accent—and I come on a most delicate errand. It concerns a number of people, two at least of whom you knew—your husband and Count von Laufenthal. If you can spare a few minutes I would be much in your debt."

Chester had, without knowing why, decided he could not bluff or bully this woman, and he had decided on the instant that he would tell her the whole story of Peter Melville and Gabriele, and then face her with his suspicions about the Terfen tragedy and see if she could be persuaded to talk.

After a long moment during which she looked straight into his eyes, as if this were a sure method of diagnosing his intentions, she inclined her head and said: "Please come in."

They sat in the small front room, packed with carved furniture, small pieces of porcelain, wooden figures, framed photographs and other knick-knacks. They sat in silence in the two velvet-covered arm-chairs, the evening light nearly gone. Chester had brought the story down to the first visit to Terfen and the attempt on his life near Jenbach, but he had not said anything yet about his suspicions. He had simply made it quite clear that he was determined to find some means to force the Count's approval of Gabriele marrying Peter. He was awaiting her comments on the tale so far.

Her voice came to him out of the shadows:

"You have trusted me with a very dangerous story, Herr Chester. Why do you think I shall respect your trust and how do you think I can possibly help you in your design to bring about this marriage?"

"To the first question the answer is I don't know—I trust you because I feel I can: that's all I can say, but I'm reckoned quite a good judge of character. But, please remember this, I don't expect you to like what I still have to say, or to think very well of me after you hear it. However, I also trust you not to disclose to anyone what I suspect."

"Suspect? Suspect what, Herr Chester, and of whom?" The voice was still quiet and the manner calm.

"Frau Doktor, I told you I visited Schloss Terfen. Well, I paid two visits. And from the simple and moving story the housekeeper told me—as she had doubtless told hundreds of others—there came to my mind first a suspicion and then a certainty."

Chester wished he could see his companion's expression, but now they sat in almost total darkness, the window but a patch of lighter darkness against which the old lady's head formed a faint silhouette. But he fancied he caught a different rhythm in her breathing at his last words.

"Yes," he went on, "the suspicion that the Count's son and his mistress did not die by the boy's hand, but were murdered."

This time he was sure that her breathing betrayed some apprehension. But she said nothing and Chester was obliged to go on:

"The housekeeper remembers with certainty that she heard a shot, then a cry, and then another shot. She has no idea of what that implies; but if the girl cried out—and the housekeeper was sure it was a woman's voice—the first shot must have killed the young man and the second killed the girl. And yet the revolver was found in his hand. The position of the wounds, about which the housekeeper was also certain, indicates murder too; murder by someone standing in the doorway. For the young man was shot in his left side—beneath the armpit—a very difficult and unlikely place in which to shoot oneself. The girl was shot through the heart. It

seems obvious to me that the murderer aimed at the girl, that the man flung himself across her to protect her; that he received the first bullet and sank back as the girl screamed; that she received the second bullet; and that his body was simply dragged across hers by the murderer to look convincing, and the pistol placed in his hand—his left hand. I wonder, now I come to think of it, if the boy—who is known to have been left-handed, would have fired a pistol with his left hand: it doesn't necessarily follow. But that doesn't matter. What does matter is that I am certain the couple were murdered."

After what seemed a number of minutes she spoke, her voice now trembling:

"Having told me your terrible suspicions, mein Herr, how can it possibly concern me and why have you gone out of your way to come and tell me these dreadful things?"

"I do genuinely regret having upset you, gnädige Frau, but there is one fact you may have which will complete the picture—perhaps the most important fact of all. Your husband was called to attend the couple. He would have been a very bad doctor—and I'm sure he was quite the opposite—if he had not noticed whether or no there were dark powder marks round the wounds. Those marks would be plainly visible on the white night-clothes, if the young man had shot himself and his mistress with the pistol close up to its targets. If there were no powder burns it was murder; and your

husband would know it. Now, I don't blame him for keeping that knowledge to himself—it has nothing whatever to do with me—and I don't know why he should have kept it dark. But I badly need the final confirmation of my belief, and I have a feeling that your husband must have been deeply disturbed and told you at the time. I shall never mention your name in connection with the matter: that goes without saying."

"Mein Herr, you are dabbling in things that do not concern you. I advise you to keep these ideas of yours to yourself——"

Chester interrupted her.

"I'm sorry, but it *does* concern me. I know I have stumbled over the means of forcing the Count's hand, and I intend using them. I shall inform him that I know the couple was murdered, and that if he does not release his daughter I shall publish my story."

"Publish it?" she gasped. "But you must never do that!"

Chester was about to reply when she said in a voice now trembling violently:

"And you will tell who the murderer was?"

"Why, goodness gracious, how could I do that? I don't know the murderer any more than you do. But if my suspicions are correct, it will harm no one to know. I suspect it was the unfortunate lady's husband, who shot himself afterwards. He must have followed the couple to Terfen with the intention of shooting his wife, or perhaps both of them."

Chester heard Frau Doktor Haller give a long sigh—as if of relief—and sensed rather than saw that she had relaxed and leant back in her chair. This puzzled him a little, after the acute signs of distress she had shown before. But he was too anxious in pressing his point to bother about it.

“Please, Frau Doktor, tell me. Did you gather from your husband that all was not as it appeared to be?”

Chester paused.

“But you know, gnädige Frau, I need not really ask you. Your evident distress and your exhortation just now had, in fact, told me what I wanted to know. I didn’t mean to trick you—I hope you will believe that—but if the accepted story had been true you would have surely have been unmoved or even scornful of my theories.” Again there was a long silence, broken only by the sound of a man with a stick making his way past the house.

“You have tricked me, Herr Chester,” she said at last, “but I don’t think you meant to. I will tell you enough for your purposes. You were right. They were murdered. My husband knew immediately by the very evidence you mentioned: the wounds showed no powder marks. As to why he kept silent I shall not tell you—but it would not help you in any case.”

Chester could have shouted with satisfaction, but his conscience was sufficiently painful to keep the triumph out of his voice.

“Frau Doktor, I do indeed apologise again for what I

did. All I can do—and I do not pretend I am not satisfied—is to promise that nothing I say will lead back to you. I blame myself a little less than I might, as my cause is good; a lot of happiness for two people is at stake.” He got up. “Please do not bother to move—I can find my way to the door. Good-bye, gnädige Frau, and my sincere thanks.”

“Good-bye, Herr Chester—I hope your crusade will be successful. But be very careful: the Count is a hard man.”

As he let himself out into the narrow dark street, Chester remembered the last time he had visited a lady to obtain information about the Count: she, too, had wished him good luck in his venture.

Instead of going straight back to the hotel he wandered about the little town and found his way to the wooden bridge which spanned the swirling Inn as it poured past the row of ancient houses built into its southern bank. The moon alternately raced behind the flimsy clouds which blew across the sky, and hung suspended over the mountains when the clear deep sky took command. Chester leaned over the balustrade and gazed up the valley, towards Innsbruck, towards Count von Lauenfenthal, towards Gabriele. He wondered how he should now go about giving the Count the *coup de grâce*. He decided he would go to Innsbruck early in the morning or have Franz deliver a letter to Schloss Ansbach. But this time he would not stay for an answer: he would go back to Salzburg and force the Count to come there. The interview at Ansbach still rankled. However, the

first thing he would do on arriving at Innsbruck station would be to send Peter Melville a cable telling him there was new hope. He lit a cigar and strolled back to the hotel, starting in his mind to draft the letter he would write, and savouring the triumph he now saw within reach.

Next morning he climbed the steps to the little wayside station that was all Rattenberg rated; and at seven minutes past ten the clattering Personenzug of four-wheel coaches, with their open-air platforms crowded with chattering peasants, took Chester off to Innsbruck.

Having sent the telegram to Melville, he walked from the station to the Goldene Sonne and went straight up to Franz.

"Herr Chester! What a surprise! What a pleasant surprise! You never warned us to expect you; and where is the rest of your luggage?"

All this tumbled out in a gush of well-feigned solicitude. Chester grinned:

"I'm just here for a minute or two, and then straight back to Salzburg. Tell me, Franz, can you get a letter taken to the Count within an hour or so? I am going to write it here now."

"Alas, Herr Chester, it is impossible. Count von Laufenthal is not at present in residence at Schloss Ansbach."

This was far from what Chester expected, yet there was no reason why the Count should be at Ansbach, when he came to think of it.

"Oh, I see. Well, what do you think is the best way of reaching him? It is extremely urgent."

Franz pursed his lips and made a great show of deliberation. Finally he put his head on one side and said judicially:

"Of course it might be possible, if the matter were really urgent, to have the letter delivered to the steward at Schloss Ansbach and ask him to include it in the next packet he forwards to the Count, wherever he may be."

"Well, be a good fellow and arrange it," said Chester, shortly: "I'll have the letter ready in half an hour."

He picked up what he had written and read it through for the third time:

"DEAR COUNT,

"I should be glad if you would answer this letter immediately and let me know when you can meet me at the Hotel Goldenes Schiff in Salzburg. Fate has thrown in my way a means which I think will persuade you to reconsider your decision about Gabriele and her marriage to Peter Melville. Like any other tourist I happened to visit Schloss Terfen, as you know; and as I listened to the tragic story of your son I was struck by certain strange inconsistencies in what appeared at first to be a straightforward story. I wonder how many visitors to that castle have bothered to get the housekeeper to repeat carefully what she actually heard on that night in 1898. Shot,

scream, shot was what she heard, and the scream was uttered by a woman. Add to that strange sequence the fact that your son was shot in the left side—bearing in mind the relative positions of bed and door—and high up beneath his armpit, and the girl was shot through the heart; and that the housekeeper could not remember seeing the powder burns which would have been an obvious feature of such close shooting. These facts, as you will realise, add up to only one word—murder; murder by a third party.

"I am loath to awake old and painful memories, even in you, but your behaviour has been so unbending that I must use what weapons I have to gain justice and happiness for my friend. In this case I shall have no hesitation in seeing that some journalist of international repute is informed of these facts, with which he would write what would undoubtedly prove one of the most sensational articles of modern times.

"If you meet the reasonable demands of my friend and myself, which I will detail when I see you, I give you my word that I shall not divulge further what I know.

"Yours,

"HOWARD L. CHESTER."

He was not over-pleased with this; it sounded rather pompous, but it said what had to be said and must suffice. He folded it in a piece of blank note-paper before putting it in the envelope so that no inquisitive

person could read anything, even if the letter were placed against a light. Chester then addressed it, put the words 'Please Forward' in the corner, and took it out to Franz with a substantial tip and enough extra to cover the cost of a messenger to Ansbach.

"Franz," he added, "you will please impress upon all concerned the extreme urgency. If it is delayed, it will be the Count who will be angry, not me."

"I assure you, Herr Chester, it will go with all possible speed. The messenger will be off within a quarter of an hour. Will you not honour us by staying for a night?"

"No, Franz, I must be off at once——" He paused, suddenly remembering that he intended a visit to the graves of the Terfen couple. He looked at his watch. He could easily go there and back in an hour, but this time the unworthy Franz should know nothing of his movements. "No, I can't leave until this afternoon, now I come to think of it, as I must do some shopping. Is there a Schnellzug to Salzburg in the early afternoon?"

"At two twenty-two, Herr Chester."

"Then I'll take that. I'll leave my bag with you."

Chester walked to the Bahnhofplatz and hired a two-horse *Fiaker* for the three-mile drive. With its rubber tyres it should not prove too uncomfortable.

"I want to go to the village churchyard at Ansbach," he told the driver, "and then back here: I shall only want to stay there a few minutes."

"Jawohl, mein Herr," answered the man in sonorous tones, and whipped up his horses.

The little cemetery at Ansbach was on a gently sloping piece of ground to the west of the fine pink-washed church with its typical onion spire; it was easy to see where the Laufenthal tombs stood in elaborate isolation along the upper edge. Chester followed a path between the forest of humbler graves, many with wrought iron crosses bearing photographs of the deceased enclosed in oval glass frames, and when he came to the Laufenthal area he looked round for the unconsecrated extension to the churchyard. He found it at the extreme corner of the property, surrounded by a chain stretched between short granite pillars. The tomb itself was a severe obelisk, one side of which bore a polished panel with the names of the couple cut deep in the stone in big block letters. Beneath them was carved a passage of what appeared to be verse:

WAS ICH LIEBE, MUSS ICH VERLASSEN,
MORDEN, WEN JE ICH MINNE

Chester translated it to himself: WHAT I LOVE I MUST ABANDON; I MURDER THOSE WHOM I ADORE. The quotation was vaguely familiar to him, but he could not place it: so he copied the words on to the back of an envelope for future reference. He stood looking at the simple and severe monument to the unfortunate couple, wondering if Fate would ever arrange for the truth to be published. Then he walked down through the graves and climbed into the *Fiaker*,

with only a passing glance at the Castle where it stood high among the trees with its walls and turrets glimmering in the midday sun.

The origin of the quotation occupied him for a few minutes as they jogged off down the road, but it was soon forgotten as he lay back on the seat gazing at the puffy white clouds drifting across the blue sky. They made him think of 'Brünnhilde', neatly packed in her basket and now quietly lying in the baggage-room at Salzburg station. With the Laufenthal trouble now as good as settled, he abandoned himself to exhilarating images of himself taking off from the ancient city and floating away towards the mountains. What a panorama he would have before him up there; and then the mountains themselves, some of which he was determined to cross. He would bring 'Brünnhilde' down in a valley somewhere to the south-east of Werfen, and stay the night in a homely farmhouse with its wooden tiles and big stones to keep the roof down, or at some little village inn if he could find one.

By the time he had paid off the driver in the Bahnhofplatz he was in a calm and benevolent mood. He went into the station telegraph office to cable Stella—she would know the source of the passage on the tomb—and he carefully transcribed the verse, adding a request that she solve this minor literary puzzle and answer by letter to Salzburg. Then he walked back to the hotel for a light lunch before catching his train.

XIV

Count von Laufenthal Tries Again

CHESTER arrived in Salzburg late that evening and took Mason and Julius to Tomaselli's for a light meal. Happily ensconced amid the red plush, gilt ornaments and flashing chandeliers, he told Mason the news and of the last letter he had sent the Count. Mason grew gloomy over his tall glass of beer as the story proceeded, and made a wry face as his master ended with a grin:

"Now there are two of us who know the facts, Mason, in case I'm killed!"

"I don't like it, sir, not one bit. That man is dangerous; and if what you suspect about the Terfen affair is really true, he will go after you again—sure as eggs."

"I've thought about that, and I think we must take precautions when he comes to see me. Can you shoot straight with a pistol, Mason?"

"Good gracious, sir, what do you want me to do?"

"I think I shall arrange to meet him in the safely public surroundings of the Mirabell Garden, but I'm going to get you fitted up with a pistol and tell him he's covered all the time. May seem a bit melodramatic, but I'm taking no chances. So you must carry a pistol. I'll get one here somehow."

Mason seemed less alarmed at the prospect of just keeping his eye on the Count, and said so.

"But you don't seriously think he'll try any more games, do you?"

"One never knows. The whole business is very strange. For example, I wonder if he suspected the Terfen affair wasn't all above-board and bribed the doctor to keep quiet to avoid an even greater family scandal. Or if what I told him came as fresh news. In either case he would be equally keen on shutting my mouth, and as he has calmly had his minions pot at me on the 'King's highway', I certainly don't put it past him to try again. You must remember, Mason, that that sort of man lives in feudal state and has thoughts and feelings and principles that we common folk can scarce believe have survived. So our watchword is 'Be Prepared'!"

They then fell to discussing the ascent in 'Brünnhilde', and it was decided that Chester would immediately approach the local gas-works—the only practicable point of ascent—and then go and pay his respects to the editor of the *Tageblatt* who would be a useful all-round man to know, and also a centre of news about the weather and local conditions generally.

Next morning Chester drove to the gas-works and was most courteously received. After a short discussion about the price of the coal-gas and a tour of the installation to choose a suitable spot for the take-off, Chester closed the deal and drove to the railway station

to release 'Brünnhilde' from her gloomy prison in the luggage office. He made arrangements to have her transported the short journey to the gas-works, and left Mason to supervise them while he drove off to visit the offices of the *Salzburger Tageblatt*. This visit, too, was all that could be desired and Chester left well pleased with himself. Then it started to rain.

For three whole days the rain poured down from a leaden sky and Chester could do little but fume and kick his heels. He paid frequent visits to the St. Peter's Stiftkeller - where the wine was excellent—and occasionally made a shopping expedition. At the hotel he slept far into the morning and ate meals too large for his comfort. He also brooded over the Count and, on the first day, over Julius whose stomach was upset by some chicken he ate. But by the second day the poodle was in better spirits and able to appreciate his two good meals and the evening spoonful of Marsala. After dinner, Chester took him for a brief wet walk amongst the flower-beds of the Mirabell Garden, and the cure was complete.

Mason, however, was busy and happy, making many visits in the 'Silver Steamer' to the gas-works to get 'Brünnhilde' ready, learning about the terrain from those natives he met who spoke English, and often stopping off at the offices of the *Salzburger Tageblatt* where he received the latest weather news from Herr Bühler's secretary. Herr Bühler himself—the editor of the *Tageblatt*—was taking a great interest in Chester's

flight, and had whipped up his fellow citizens to an extraordinary pitch of enthusiasm for the occasion. After all, as he said, it was only the second balloon ascent the city was to witness since Herr Spielmann held his display there back in the 'eighties. Herr Bühler, a rubicund person in his fifty-first year, with prodigious moustaches, had already paid Chester a ceremonial visit at the hotel and been prevailed upon to stay for dinner, despite his daytime dress of stockings and Lederhosen. The dinner—on the first of the rainy days—had been an unqualified success, and the editor was thereafter a confirmed and vociferous admirer of Chester; of 'Brünnhilde', whom he visited at the gas-works next day; the 'Silver Steamer', in which he had been conveyed there; and of Julius, whom he christened 'Herr Schnurrbart' because of his moustaches, and whom—he said—had the second finest set of whiskers in Salzburg, after his own. He promised, too, to give up-to-date weather news whenever Chester cared to use his telephone, an instrument of which he was very proud. This offer was gratefully accepted but sparingly used, as it amused Mason to go in person. Chester knew that all the neighbouring resorts sent in their local weather news to the *Tageblatt*, and the information was most useful. He also learnt that a north or slightly north-westerly wind was more than probable after the protracted downpour they were now enduring.

The fourth day dawned superbly. Chester put his head out of the hotel window, sniffed the pure cool air

and looked with delight at the pure cool sky, translucently blue and cloudless.

The Mönchsberg rose before him like a screen to hide the circle of distant mountains which must now be on fire with the morning sun. The fortress, outlined on the eastern brow of the great rock, dominated the city and looked almost gay this morning with its roofs shining in the golden light.

Mason was already up and came to Chester's room with a cup of strong coffee.

"I have already been to the *Tageblatt*, sir, and they say that all is well. The wind is slight and fairly constantly from the north; it will probably freshen by the afternoon and might veer a little."

"Splendid!" cried Chester, "Splendid! I can even forget the damned Count on a day like this; the thought of one really fine flight in this lovely country makes up for almost everything." He started firing questions: Could Mason get 'Brünnhilde' inflated by three o'clock? Was their gas pressure all right out there? Were they quite happy about supplying the gas? Did he think they ought to tip anyone else? How about Herr Waldmann? ("Send some nice flowers to his wife, Mason—a gas-works superintendent's Frau can't get many bouquets—make it a fine bunch.")

Chester bent down and started to unpack a parcel which stood by the porcelain stove.

"Mason," he said, "I want you to take these and stow them aboard when you go along."

Mason looked at the objects with curiosity and misgiving. "It's the latest type of phonograph with some of Madame Patti's finest records which have just been issued," said Chester. He had always had an idea that he would play records during a balloon flight, but had not dared to risk the ridicule he knew would descend on him had he done any such thing at the Aero Club meetings in England. Now it would not matter—might even appeal to the romantic Austrians, he thought. He would take up some Patti records, as well as his Stella Barrington favourites which he always carried with him when travelling, and, liked to play in his friends' houses.

"I was very lucky, Mason; I found both machine and records in a little music shop near the Residenz."

"You are proposing to take them up with you, sir?" asked Mason suspiciously. Chester was sure Mason would not approve of such eccentricity, and said as much.

"Well, sir," answered Mason, almost with condescension, "it is an original idea, I'm sure. I will stow them aboard." And he picked up the gear and disappeared without another word.

By ten o'clock the whole city seemed to know that the flight was to take place that afternoon, and people were even clustering outside the hotel entrance. The 'Steamer' made several journeys out to the gas-works with Mason at the wheel and assorted equipment of every kind on the back seat, and on its second trip back

it had borne Herr Bühler to the hotel for the personal interview with Chester.

Over more than one glass of midday beer the editor chuckled and nodded and questioned as he took down details of the flight. He was excited at what might be a dangerous landing in the mountains ("Even the beautiful fir trees are not very comfortable, Herr Chester"); he was pleased at the compliments paid to Salzburg; and he was enchanted by the idea of playing operatic airs in the silent spaces of the sky ("Fabelhaft, Herr Chester!").

"And what about der kleine schwarze Schnurrbart," he asked, "you will leave him safely below with Herr Mason?"

"Good gracious, no! Why, he always flies with me. The only difference today is that I shall have had a little parachute made for him, as we shall almost certainly have to make a rough landing; and I shall drop him overboard at the last minute: otherwise he will get badly knocked about in the basket."

"A parachute? For Herr Schnurrbart? For der kleine Schwarze? Oh, that is too wonderful, Herr Chester, too superb! My readers, they will be enraptured!" And he rolled his blue eyes and his big head, and slapped his leather breeches.

They thereupon drank a toast to Julius—who lay asleep on a near-by chair—and then Herr Bühler set off for his office.

At three o'clock Chester emerged from the hotel and was surprised at being cheered by a crowd of some

hundreds of the local inhabitants, along with a sprinkling of tourists. Chester looked smartly robust in a brown tweed suit and riding-breeches, tall white collar and dull red tie against which a diamond pin sparkled. The ensemble was topped by a brown cloth cap set rather down at the peak.

The shining 'Silver Steamer' matched its master's bulky elegance and drew many envious eyes. Chester took his seat behind the white-coated Mason and called to Julius, who was complacently standing on the sidewalk and being patted by as many of the onlookers as could reach him. Then he gave one short bark and jumped—skipped would be almost more appropriate—into the 'Steamer' and sat up beside Chester. Then he turned towards his admirers and grinned. The crowd cheered.

Many of the onlookers seemed to expect a roar from the motor as the 'Steamer' made to start, and were promptly the targets for patronising remarks by those who had already seen the car making its distinguished and silent passage through the streets. It now slid away from the hotel without a sound, its silver bonnet and coachwork shining in the afternoon sun, and made for the river. The Gasfabrik was just outside the city, at Lehen, and the 'Steamer' sped along the right bank of the Salzach up the Müllnerhauptstrasse until it came to the level crossing which carried the main railroad to Munich. Five minutes later the party drove into the courtyard of the red-brick gas-works, with its great iron

drums looking ugly and incongruous against the hazy beauty of the hills to the west. A few yards away swelled the brightly-sunlit bulk of 'Brünnhilde', now almost fully inflated, and rocking gently in the breeze. The Stars and Stripes fluttered from the rigging next to the Austrian colours—as a courtesy to his hosts. Chester was surprised to be greeted here, too, by some fifty or so energetic townsfolk who had walked, bicycled or driven out to see the take-off, the gay dirndls of the women adding colour to the drab surroundings of the gas-works.

As Chester dismounted and walked towards the balloon, the gas-works officials, headed by Herr Waldmann and his wife came to welcome him. Frau Waldmann turned out to be a pretty woman in her thirties who proudly clutched Chester's fine bouquet, and looked a little uncomfortable in what Mason solemnly informed Chester—in a stage whisper—was the latest Paris creation of marine *crêpon de soie*.

The little crowd clustered round the aeronaut and his hosts, and Chester caught sight of Herr Bühler, his face beaming with pleasure, rapidly scribbling in a large notebook.

After the civilities were over and a routine inspection made of the equipment, Chester and Julius were helped on board by willing hands. A rising clamour of voices rose amid a good deal of friendly laughter as the on-lookers fully took in the strange passengers now about to ascend. Julius had disappeared from view and

Chester, in his smart sporting turn-out, stood smilingly against the huge horn of the phonograph which rose above the edge of the basket like a giant bluebell.

Then the applause became uproarious as Chester bent to pick up a rather sheepish-looking Julius, and with some difficulty fitted on his canine parachute harness. This consisted of a white webbing sling, with its bands tied on top of the poodle's body and fixed to the small bundled-up canopy—which was of bright crimson silk to make it visible from as great a distance as possible.

When the gas-works men had tried 'Brünnhilde' for lift and the surplus ballast had been dumped upon the ground-sheet, all was ready. Chester, after saying elaborate good-byes all round, was about to give the order to let go, when Mason leant forward—a slight smirk on his face—and said to Chester.

"Give the locals a treat, sir; why not put on a record and play yourself out?"

"Splendid idea, Mason!" laughed Chester. "I know you hate the sight of our mechanical passenger but you'll get over it!" And he bent to pick up a record and put it on the turn-table.

"Mason, I'll telegraph you at the hotel when and from where I can; but don't worry if you don't hear till morning. We'll probably land in the wilds. We are well stocked up with everything we need, and can even spend the night out with our blankets if we have to. Have you filled both Thermos flasks with coffee?—good. Then here we go. All right," he called in German. "Let go!"

The great yellow sphere—dazzling in the afternoon sun—lifted gently above the gasometers; and a shouting, clapping audience redoubled its applause when the invisible Stella Barrington began to sing. So with the aria 'mi chiamano Mimi' from *La Bohème* floating down so oddly from the balloon, the second most famous aerial voyage from the ancient city of Salzburg got off to a spectacular start.

Chester felt grandly exhilarated. Spread out beneath him to the east were the slanting roofs and pointing spires on both sides of the Salzach, with the coloured flower-beds of the Mirabell Garden just visible beyond the Protestant church. The curving, tree-covered hump of the Mönchsberg, with its watchful fortress, passed slowly beneath him. Ahead was the river valley towards Hallein and the great sweeping panorama of the mountain ranges on either side. Far-off in the distance, hazy in the sunlit air, rose the jagged white peaks on the horizon. This, thought Chester, is what a mountain-scape should be: it was grandeur and romance after his own heart. He had no thoughts for the Count, and only—at this inspired time—a dim background of sympathetic feelings for Peter Melville. Here and now it was pure enjoyment of a kind he had often dreamed about and had nearly, but never quite, attained before. When Stella had finished her aria, the balloon was too far away from Salzburg for Chester to catch any sounds from the city except for an occasional whistle from the railway station. Here was unearthly silence except for

the birds in the trees below and the tinkle of the cow-bells as the cattle grazed on the lower slopes of the mountains. Occasional creaks of the rigging above were the only sounds that kept him close company.

In silence 'Brünnhilde' passed over Schloss Anif, Chester's favourite Austrian castle, which stood straight out of a little tree-lined lake as if it had suddenly risen there by magic. Then the castle was retreating behind him, and he felt it time for another record.

This time he chose Patti singing the 'O Patria Mia' from *Aida*. Chester gazed at the scene below. The mountains were coming nearer; the trees at the timber-line and the grey rock faces above now grew steadily more distinct, and Chester realised that 'Brünnhilde' was sailing somewhat off the line of the Salzach valley; the red roofs of Hallein were now passing to his right. So he dropped ballast and started rising. Soon he saw his barometer registering the equivalent of five thousand feet, and he held the balloon as near as possible to that height by judicious ladling of sand. The mountains were now all around him, and he could clearly see the snow-tipped Tännengebirge on the horizon and the Dachstein nearer, on his port bow. Over to the right, towering supreme in the blue distance, was the mighty Hochkönig.

Below he could pick out the little valley streams which wandered like silver snakes amongst the fir trees and fields, and finally found their way into the Salzach. He floated happily on.

Chester had just sent 'Brünnhilde' even higher, and he bent to take the arm off the phonograph after another record. Patti's superb voice had ceased and the final scratch round of the needle stopped. Again the pure silence. Suddenly he felt lonely, which surprised him. Perhaps, he thought, it is the unusual feeling of being above the mountains, in their own world of space, instead of down below looking up at them with admiration. The silence was almost overwhelming.

And then he thought of Stella and her letter. He could not imagine how he had been able to put it in his pocket and immediately forget it until now. Perhaps it was excusable with all the excitement. Now it was this sudden loneliness that brought her so quickly back to mind.

He took the envelope out, tore it open, and with one swift glance around him to see that all was well, he read:

"MY DEAR HOWARD,

"Your riddle was not very hard to solve! You must have been very sleepy when you first read the lines; and you a devotee of Wagner into the bargain! It is a quotation from *Die Walküre*, Act 2, where Wotan is singing to Brünnhilde and laments the death of his son Sigmund, a death which he was forced by Fricka to bring about himself. Hence the terrible cry 'What I love, I must abandon! I must murder those whom I adore.' I can't think why the Count chose it for the tomb, except that the 'WEN' in 'WEN JE ICH MINNE' means, of course (apart from this particular

context), just 'WHOM', and can refer to a he or she. However it is an apt verse as far as it goes——"

Chester did not read further. His eyes left the notepaper and stared down at the retreating landscape.

"Good God!" he muttered, and even these quiet words seemed clangorous in the silence of the skies. "Good God," he repeated, "I believe I know why he put that verse on the tomb. I wonder why I never thought of it before. It was the Count himself who murdered the couple—his own son and his son's mistress. Anyone knowing Wagner and knowing of the tragedy would consider it a charming and sensitive allusion, and merely think how clever to use a quotation that grammatically fitted a man or woman as the killer. Yes, I feel sure that's it; he put that verse there as a kind of public confession that no one would recognise. But why—for the love of heaven, why did he kill them? If I am right in thinking he did."

All this had been said out loud, unconsciously, and Julius—disturbed by his master's soliloquy—looked up at him and barked. Chester bent down and patted the dog's head, then stood upright and stretched himself, his arms raised above him. He let his hands lightly grasp the car lines, and raised his head to look affectionately up at the great yellow envelope which supported them. His eyes travelled over the familiar details—the little sleeve through which the crimson rip-cord emerged, and the open neck directly above

him with the dangling valve-line disappearing into it and becoming lost in the darkness of the gas-bag. He thought the fabric round the neck-join seemed a little out of shape, and moved his head to one side to get a better view. That's odd, he thought, it certainly is out of shape; there's a slight but distinct bulge in the fabric. Wondering if someone had accidentally put their foot on the silk and wrenched it, he decided to have a closer look; so he climbed on to the edge of the basket. He looked up again and this time felt a certain uneasiness, without knowing why. He then scrambled up into the hoop and braced himself against the leading lines, a seemingly perilous but quite safe manœuvre which drew a short whine from Julius. Chester glanced down at him, told him to be quiet, and again peered up at the bulge. As he did so, he was aware of a faint but distinct sound of ticking. For a moment he wondered if his ears were playing him false, as there is nothing in a balloon that ticks. He strained to get a better view, now certain that the ticking came from inside the envelope. Beneath the bulge he could just see a strand or two of white thread, as if some object inside had been loosely secured to the silk. Then the realisation of what the ticking meant stole slowly down his spine in a chill trickle. Count von Laufenthal was trying again.

Chester stared up at the bulge. How on earth, he wondered, could anyone have tampered with 'Brünnhilde'? But he realised almost at once that there had been a number of men helping with the inflation, and it

would have only been the work of a minute or two to pass a small mechanism through the neck and make it fast just inside the envelope. No one would suspect its presence. It had probably been placed there in the morning, and the clock set going when the inflation was well under way, and when Mason was collecting equipment in the city.

As such speculations ran through his mind he became calmer and went to work. He climbed down into the basket and pulled out his pocket-knife. It's a pity for their sakes, he thought, grimly, that the damned Count and his minions did not know too much about balloons.

Chester reached up and cut through the slender neck-line which kept the neck—and hence the lower hemisphere—of 'Brünnhilde' tied loosely to the hoop so that the valve and ripping cords could not be snarled.

Then he made sure that everything in the basket was unattached and easy to reach. Next he examined Julius's parachute and its harness, and pushed the poodle under the seat on which the phonograph stood. This done, he took off the phonograph horn, placed it over his head like a grotesque pixie's cap and waited. He had done all he could now. Height was his ally, and he must stick it out until the worst happened; which might be minutes, or might be hours.

He could only look downwards; and there the mountainscape moved steadily by. He tried to fix their position in his mind and failed, thinking he had seen Golling way off to the west. But he was not sure the

place was Golling. He tried to relax. Thank the heavens, he said again to himself. Oh, thank the merciful heavens that that damned Count doesn't know balloons! There was now only one other thing he really feared——

Then the bomb went off.

The sharp, ear-splitting crack was accompanied by a blast of hot air which beat on his hands and thrust the phonograph horn hard over his head. Then the plunge downwards.

But what Chester had feared most had not happened: the explosion had not ignited the gas.

He flung the great horn off his head and away into space, and glanced upwards. Every balloonist, in the back of his mind, is prepared for a burst envelope, although it seldom happens in flight. If you cut the neck-line and let the empty, shattered envelope float up into the top of the net, it will act as a parachute—provided there are not too many people on board and that all possible weight is jettisoned—and bring you down safely, if with considerable discomfort.*

Chester glanced up to see the tattered yellow fabric pressed in a spreading vault against the net above his head; and also took in the welcome fact that only a few strands of the rigging had been blasted away by the explosion. Poor 'Brünnhilde' was holding together. Then he looked down and saw Julius's frightened face

*This method of escape was first used by the American balloonist John Wise, about 1838, and has saved a number of lives since.

emerging from under the phonograph. Chester was dimly aware of him having let out a single stifled yelp, after the bomb went off.

"Good dog, Julius, good dog, don't be afraid now," he shouted, as any words came into his head to pacify the poodle. He cut adrift the anchor and its rope, then the emergency ballast hanging outside the basket. Next overboard went the heavy bags of ballast on the floor; then the phonograph; and last the precious pile of records, one of which was caught by the wind and went sailing off on its own like a flashing black bird. Chester was momentarily mesmerised by the sight, as it sped away, careening slowly until it turned on edge and plunged towards the trees.

The sickening descent suddenly slowed up and Chester realised from his statoscope that he was now falling at a fair parachute rate, and all was well for the moment. 'Brünnhilde's' envelope was so large and made such an effective parachute that there was no need to pitch out the blankets or food. But he was beginning to feel sick with the motion of the balloon. Having no vent in the crown to stabilise it like a proper parachute, the huge yellow mushroom started to rock from side to side as the air compressed beneath it spilled out, until the basket and its occupants were swinging like a giant pendulum.

'Brünnhilde' had dropped some two thousand feet before she had been pulled up to a safe speed by so much weight having gone overboard. As Chester clung to the

basket and looked down at the approaching forests, Julius began emitting a series of short staccato barks—a sure sign that he was not feeling sick or frightened any more. This reminded Chester of what awaited them below. Despite the big tough basket there would be a very rough landing for them in the trees, and Julius would get badly knocked about in the bottom of the basket. It would be no use to hold him in his arms either, as the poodle would probably be thrown out by the impact. So for his own safety the dog would have to go overboard with his parachute, decided Chester.

He watched a shelving crop of firs on a mountain-side coming steadily up to meet him, and immediately pulled Julius from under the seat and dragged the red parachute after him. He made a hurried inspection of the harness—feeling sicker every second—then piled the parachute on top of the poodle and grasped the whole combined bundle with both hands.

“Now, my boy,” he said quietly, “be a good dog and don’t be frightened. I’m going to throw you out.” Julius rolled his big almond eyes, but managed a few wags of his tail.

Chester kept his eyes on the fast approaching trees, and waited another two or three seconds.

Suddenly he was seized with a sickening dread: he had realised that Julius’s parachute, being much larger in proportion to its passenger’s weight than the parachuting balloon was, would fall slower than ‘Brünnhilde’ and hence rise in relation to the balloon. This meant

the poodle's parachute would risk getting caught in 'Brünnhilde's' rigging overhead.

For a further second he contemplated keeping Julius with him, but quickly decided the risk was even greater. So he waited until the basket had swung as high as it would go on his side; then, with all the force he could exert, he threw Julius out and slightly upwards. As Chester swung away in the basket he watched the twisting black body and the red bundle of the parachute describe a shallow diving curve. Then the parachute opened and Julius was pulled up with a sudden jerk. He began to float upwards in relation to 'Brünnhilde', with his curly legs stuck out like sticks, but without making a sound.

Chester held his breath and prayed as the broad yellow bulk of the balloon came swinging to meet the smaller red canopy. For a moment it looked as if they would foul one another. But the balloon's fabric was now mercifully swaying in the opposite direction to Julius, and the poodle's parachute met only the extreme edge of the net; slid off; and to Chester's gasping relief disappeared from view above him. Julius was safe.

A few seconds later 'Brünnhilde's' basket, with Chester crouched inside, tore into the tree-tops. To the miniature explosions of snapping fir branches, it crashed through to within some dozen feet of the ground and lurched to a jarring halt, the net and fabric having spread over the upper branches of the trees and caught fast. There was a little more crackling of twigs

and slender branches¹ before the wreckage finally settled. Then silence.

Chester slid to the floor of the basket and leant back exhausted. He looked up at the tracery of the branches above, and through to the blue sky beyond, before shifting his gaze to the yellow remains of 'Brünnhilde' draped over the trees. The gay little flags of his private *entente cordiale* hung limply over a drooping branch.

The silence was enveloping, like a green cloak. At times a gentle rustling movement came from the tall firs as a breeze swayed them; and an occasional crack from a twig as it broke under the rigging.

Then another sound came² floating down to him clearly from above the trees and away to his right—a succession of short sharp barks, with an occasional growl or a little yelp in between.

"Thank God and curse the bloody Count!" said Chester aloud to the silent trees as he struggled to his feet. He whistled; then shouted:

"Julius! Julius! Boy! Hang on! I'm coming!"

The barks grew fainter as Chester saw in his mind's eye the red parachute floating away against the vast panorama of the mountains, and suspended beneath it the struggling black figure of Julius.

Chester wrapped the food in the blankets and dropped the bundle to the ground before scrambling over the side of the basket and letting himself stretch to the length of his arms. With knees bent he paused, let go, and landed sprawling on a knobbly bed of moss and fir cones.

He picked himself up and cast one unhappy glance at the remains of 'Brünnhilde', her yellow silk envelope, forlornly draped across the trees. But Julius was his one concern for the moment, and with the blankets under his arm he set off in the direction he had guessed from his last sight of the poodle.

After a quarter of an hour of slipping and struggling between the tree trunks and over the slopes made slippery by moss and rotting cones, he heard faint barks in the distance. Some minutes later he tried whistling and calling, which soon evoked renewed and vigorous barking somewhere off to the right. Soon the barks, now near, seemed to come from overhead.

Finally he saw Julius. The poodle was hanging high up between two fir trees, his red parachute caught in the upper branches. He was struggling violently in his harness and barking angrily.

"Now hold hard, old man!" shouted Chester. "You must feel damn silly up there, and I know it's uncomfortable, but we'll get you down all right. Quiet now!"

As Julius calmed down to a series of growls and little yelps, Chester heard a slight noise behind him and swung round. Standing a few yards away was a bearded and benign-looking peasant, his gaze fixed on Julius. His face was brown and gnarled like a dried berry, and he had a little green feather in his battered hat. One hand was thrust into a pocket of his worn leather breeches; the other slowly caressed a large curving pipe. The expression on his face was, Chester thought,

a mixture of perplexity and amusement.

"Is that a dog?" he asked pointing up at Julius with his pipe. He spoke in a soft local dialect which Chester found somewhat strange.

"Yes—he's mine," answered Chester, realising suddenly that the man had probably never seen a poodle, let alone a clipped one.

"How did he get there?"

"We both came down in a balloon," said Chester, and again realised that the answer might sound quite absurd to the man.

"A balloon?"

"Yes, from the sky," said Chester weakly, wondering what was going on in the peasant's mind.

"Mighty clever," said the old man. "Are you going to leave him there?"

Chester was too concerned with Julius's predicament, and how he could be rescued, to realise at first the force of the last question. When the meaning of it reached him, he laughed:

"Good heaven's, man, no! We've got to get him down." And having said that he realised it would be no simple undertaking. The branches of these tall close-growing firs and pines start far too high up for a man to reach.

He put his hands on his hips and viewed the scene carefully. The peasant seemed to be doing the same, but said nothing. Meanwhile, Julius did not appreciate the delay and started barking again. Without realising

it, Chester was thinking out loud in English:

"What we need is a rope to throw over the rigging, and slowly drag the whole thing down."

He became conscious of his companion staring at him suspiciously.

"Oh," he said, going back to German, "I'm a foreigner—American." The man grunted and again looked up at Julius.

Chester then remembered the anchor and its rope which he had cast off after the explosion. So he asked the old man to keep guard on Julius, and after calling again to the poodle to quieten him, he made off in search of the gear, knowing it would be no easy matter to locate it. But it was now the only way of rescuing the dog.

Chester was back with the rope within half an hour, to find Julius exhausted from his fruitless exertions and only able to yelp feebly. At sight of his master he managed a weak wag or two of his tail, and paddled a little with his paws.

"We'll soon have you down," said Chester, and went to work on the rope. To one end he tied his large knife and swung it as high as he could between the trees. It caught fast in a tangle of parachute lines and fir branches, and the two men began to heave on it slowly. To the accompaniment of snapping wood and assorted canine noises, Julius was gradually lowered until Chester could take hold of him and cut off the harness.

After that—and a spate of face-licking by Julius—the

old peasant generously offered the hospitality of his house for the night. As they were about to leave, he looked up at the abandoned parachute, and pointed to the crimson material:

"Are you going to leave that skirt up there?" he asked.

Chester laughed. "Yes; but if you are able to get it down later, please present it to your wife. She may find a use for the material."

The man gave the parachute one more glance, then turned and led the way without a word down through the trees. After a few minutes, Chester heard him mutter something, and asked what he said.

"Nothing, mein Herr, nothing. But I still think it a foolish way to treat a dog."

They trudged on down a twisting path—Chester with the poodle in his arms—and came suddenly on the edge of the forest and in sight of the Bauernhaus, a fine great farmstead with the winter cattle quarters beneath and the year's supply of logs stacked thick against the walls. The farmer's family—Chester now saw the 'peasant' in a more glorified light—came out to greet the couple, and Julius was soon being crooned over and petted as if he were some sort of wounded hero returned from the wars.

It was not until he was lying on his back in the high carved bed—with Julius asleep by his side as a special favour—that Chester collected his scattered thoughts and began to lay his plans. He realised to the full the extreme danger in which he stood from the Count, who,

as soon as he received Chester's letter, must have thought the secret was out. Chester then thought back to Dr. Haller's wife and her evident relief when he said he suggested Herr Rechtlin was the murderer. Her husband must have suspected or known about the Count, and have been either bribed or frightened into silence.

Chester also remembered his almost jocular conversation with Mason about getting a pistol, and now determined that both of them should be armed. But what about their meeting with the Count? Perhaps the 'Steamer' would be a better place than the Mirabell Garden in which to conduct the conversation. He must think this out more fully tomorrow in the train going to Salzburg. He was becoming sleepy, and all sorts of images—even Mrs. Drummond's—moved in and out of his mind like a nonsensical pageant.

Chester turned his head to look out of the window and gazed dreamily at the silent pine trees with the moonlight silvering their needles and casting deep and velvety shadows beneath them. Poor 'Brünnhilde', he thought, all by herself out there in the forest. Then he fell asleep.

XV

Cards On the Table

"DEAREST STELLA,

"As I told you in my cable, we've won! I can hardly believe it, but there it is. Now I will tell you the whole story from where I left off in my last letter. I realised of course that the Count must have had my letter some days before I went up in 'Brünnhilde', and that he had planned the bomb idea as an ideal solution to the whole problem.

"The effect of my going straight to Herr Bühler with my story was tremendous.

"But I was careful to tell him that I had no idea who could have wanted to blow me up—I hinted it might possibly be some secret society in America! His article in the *Tageblatt*—mostly my verbatim description—was spread all over the front and second pages and I gave all the circumstantial details about the effect of bombs in such cases, the art of converting a burst balloon into a parachute, etc., etc. He was sceptical about the bomb at first, but when I showed myself only too ready for an investigation to be made, he began to believe me.

"I must jump ahead and say now that the result is on show to all the world in the Residenzplatz, as from the

day before yesterday! For the *Tageblatt* financed a team of searchers to help the police—I made a very official complaint to them, poor things!—and after a few days they found everything, including bits of the bomb. ‘Brünnhilde’ was ceremoniously brought into the city and permission was given to put the remains on public exhibition—it is right outside my window as I sit now—and the crowds have been packing the Platz ever since. The bits of the bomb are placed on a special table with a big placard, and near-by is Julius’s parachute—it is going back to the farmer’s wife as I promised—the mangled remains of the phonograph and, my dear, one of your records! Then there are large photographs of Julius looking like a prima donna, and me—also like a prima donna—and as many bits and pieces of wreckage as they could find out there in the wilds. My beautiful ‘Brünnhilde’ herself is of course the main exhibit, her lovely great lemon-yellow envelope heaped up inside the tangled net; the basket stands beside her with the Stars and Stripes and the Austrian flag draped over the edge. Incidentally, I asked Herr Bühler to mark the spot in the forest and what do you think he said? He wants to erect a monument there in the forest to commemorate the crash, just like the one to Blanchard and Jeffries in the forest of Guînes near Calais after their Channel crossing of 1795! He has even opened a public subscription and the money is simply pouring in. Well, well. But back to our serious business.

"I was really quite convinced that the Count would plot effective murder as soon as he heard of my balloon escape. So I procured two pistols—Mason is scared stiff of his—and kept a sharp look-out around me both in and outside the hotel. His letter arrived the evening of the day the story appeared, delivered by hand to the hotel. It was addressed from his Salzburg house, and read:

" 'HERR CHESTER,

" 'If you will call here tomorrow morning at 11 a.m. I will discuss with you the matter mentioned in your letter.

" 'VON LAUFENTHAL.'

"Stiff-necked old scoundrel! As if the poor Yankee fly would play the game of spider's-web like that! So I wrote back:

" 'DEAR COUNT,

" 'If you are not at this hotel at 11 a.m. the game will be up. Not only will the article be written, but more serious things will be put in train. You may not realise that the clock mechanism often survives such explosions, and in this case the clock bears the name of a Salzburg maker with a serial number which has been traced. You will appreciate the implications.

" 'Yours,

" 'HOWARD L. CHESTER.'

- " 'PS. It was unwise of you to place that quotation from the *Walküre* on the tomb.
- " 'PPS. It will not avail you anything if you steal the remains of the bomb from the Residenzplatz as the police have made detailed photographs.'

"That bit about the clock mechanism is quite true by the way. As soon as I heard about it I saw the chief of police and warned him that it might lead his enquiries into rather elevated quarters, and that I should be glad—seeing it was I who was to be murdered—if he would be particularly discreet. He is a fine fellow and not afraid of anyone, and prayed me to say whom I suspected; but I said it was only an idea and at the moment I could tell him nothing. Incidentally I have the definite impression that the Count is not much liked—and certainly not feared—around here; which is all to the good.

"Well, I made my preparations for the morning and instructed the hall porter that the Count—I was confident he would come—should be brought straight up to my room without notifying me first; and that on no account should anyone else be allowed up with him. And I made other plans, too, which you will hear of in a minute. Julius was put in the safe-keeping of the manager's wife, who is now one of his most fervent admirers.

"Sure enough, he came; and punctually. I heard

steps in the corridor, and at that I stood up, took the pistol out of my pocket—just in case—and lodged it in the top of my trousers, buttoning the jacket over it. There was a knock on the door and I called 'Herein.'

"The page-boy opened the door and stood aside, announcing the Count. I was in for my first surprise, because the Count appeared far from his unpleasantly normal self. He had had an accident and his right foot and right arm were bandaged. The arm was in a sling and his jacket was loosely slung over it with the sleeve hanging limp. His face seemed worn and wan, but he looked daggers at me. I didn't move. He hobbled across the room and glanced around him. Then he almost spat at me:

" 'Have the courtesy to assist me to sit down.'

"Without a word I walked over to a chair, carried it back to where he was standing, and placed it behind him. I was putting out my hand to steady him down when I thought my eye was playing me tricks. But as if by instinct I snatched in my hand and started backwards. I was only just in time; for his bandaged fist flew out like a rocket. He was a fraction too late and over-reached himself without reaching me. I caught his misfiring arm and thrust it to one side, at the same time shooting out my foot in a time-honoured judo trick, and caught him sideways, low on his left leg. Being off balance, both legs departed from under him and he went to the floor as if pole-axed. Then I leapt on top of him, driving his breath

out, and—I fear—was angry enough to land a real haymaker on the side of his head.

“By this time, with a torrent of good old English swear words, Mason was rolling out from under the bed—where he had been hiding—and coming to help.

“I got to my feet and we both looked down on the Count, who was out cold. It was very hard to see in this figure the sneering self-possessed master of Schloss Ansbach. I think my growing threats to his name and reputation, and my survival from what he must have believed certain death had been telling on him. His face was really haggard.

“I bent down and tapped his pockets, and remembering our previous concern with fingerprints I wrapped a handkerchief round my hand and gingerly fished out the contents. They proved more astonishing with each new find. First a pistol—that would be covered with prints; next a small tightly-stoppered bottle, which I treated with great respect; then a folded letter which I glanced at and nearly dropped in amazement. It was in *my handwriting*!

“The Count was now stirring, and his left hand feebly seeking his head, while I read the letter with a dawning realisation of what he had intended:

“*‘To whom it may concern. I hope my death will not unduly inconvenience anyone. My man Mason, who has no idea of my intentions, will take*

care of my affairs and tell my family. I cannot excuse what I am doing, nor will I explain it, except to God. Tell Peter Melville I did my best for him and this has nothing to do with him, but with another matter that has now caught up with me. It is best to go out this way.

“HOWARD L. CHESTER.”

“‘Well, I’ll be goldarned,’ I muttered, ‘what a crazy chance to take! But you know, Mason, it might just have come off. But now, quick; get two clean handkerchiefs and wrap up the pistol and bottle—it’s poison all right—be careful! only touch the edges. It is the best evidence, if we ever need it.’

“As our prisoner wearily regarded me with tired but angry eyes, I turned him over—to make a quick recovery more difficult—and started stripping the bandages off his right arm. When I got to his hand, and the last turns of the material fell away, I gasped

“‘By jimminy, Mason, what do you think of that!’ I pointed, and Mason came over and stared down at it.

“‘The ruddy bastard! the damned ruddy bastard,’ he said slowly and effectively.

“Circling the Count’s knuckles and grasped in his right palm was a broad flattened band of steel.

“‘If that knuckle-duster had landed I should have been singing with the angels, Mason. The poison would scarcely have been necessary.’”

"I then unwound the bandage from his foot and found, we we expected, a normal boot.

" 'I think you had better get up,' I said, as calmly, as I could.

"The Count rose unsteadily to his feet and sat down in the arm-chair by the table. I was more sure than ever that he was a nearly broken man. You know, my dear, as I looked at him there and thought of this last desperate effort to get rid of me, I began to realise it might have had quite a chance of success. He could have tipped that stuff down my throat and left, all in a minute or two. He seemed to think I was likely to be alone; but would probably have made a great show of demanding privacy if Mason had been with me. Once I was dead, the note would have been enough for a local coroner, no matter what Mason would have said or done, and no matter what protests were later made from home. When you revealed the full account of my researches and conclusions I posted to you, there *might* have been hell to pay for him; but he might, on the other hand, have got away with it by bribery and lying. (By the way, what a fool I was not to say in my last letter to him that I had deposited a voluminous document about him with a friend!) He would probably have gone after Mason, too. Mason only has half a dozen words of German and would have been at sea amongst so much dirty work in a foreign land.

"Well, back to the Count. The rest rather smacked

of anticlimax. 'As you^o see, Herr Chester,' he said at last, 'I am a sick man. I cannot resist your insolent demands any longer.'

"I had calmed down somewhat by this time: 'I'm glad of that, Count, because I meant every word of what I said in my letter. Now, of course, I've got even more serious evidence, which would see you well and truly in prison. Not only the discovery of the bomb mechanism; but that bottle of poison will have clear and pretty fingerprints on it, and my police friends in New York say that even a letter can have prints shown up on it.'

" 'Fingerprints?' he asked, genuinely surprised.

" 'Have you never heard of fingerprints being used by the police to identify criminals?'

" 'I have heard something about them, but did not take it seriously.'

" 'Oh, it's serious, all right; and I shall have these objects photographed, just in case.'

" 'I see,' he said slowly, and paused. 'What do you want of me?' he asked finally.

"I almost felt sorry for him; but this time I was taking no chances.

" 'First,' I said, 'I want information; then action; then a promise or two on oath. I feel annoyed enough about your doings up to date to make quite certain you play no more tricks: after all, three attempts on my life, my dog wounded and my handwriting forged—not a bad forgery either; even a damn-

Yankee doesn't find that very funny. So now to business.'

"So I went to work, with Mason standing over him with a face of thunder, longing to commit mayhem. The Count sat slumped in his chair and spoke in a low, almost querulous, voice. Here is the gist of the business:

"He admitted the Terfen murders; and (as I thought) he killed his son by mistake. He was aiming at the girl and the reason for that took me quite a time to extract, even in his beaten state. The old devil had been in love with her himself and she had already been his mistress. Presumably she had tired of him. He was insane with jealousy and had his men spy on them. When he heard they were bound for Terfen he entered the Castle secretly—he naturally knew the place inside out—and lay in wait for them. He realised that the girl's death would also solve the problem of the scandal which the husband was already showing signs of creating. The poor husband seems to have been genuinely in love with his wife, despite everything, and literally killed himself in despair after her murder.

"The Count, heartbroken by his unintentional murder of his own son, rode straight back to Ansbach to await the messenger whom he knew would soon arrive to announce the tragedy.

"I asked him if he hadn't worried about the hatred which his son would have felt for him if the plan had

gone as intended. He simply said that the boy would have got over it and—as a von Laufenthal—would have borne it in silence. In that cockeyed set-up I guess he would, at that.

“Then, after tipping some brandy down our friend’s throat, I delivered my demands; that he would not only allow the wedding but specifically give Gabriele his blessing—which I knew was the key to the whole business—and at no time give her to feel he was opposed to the marriage. Even now, I was still afraid of some dirty work, although we had enough to hang him. So I told him that I had the editor of the *Tageblatt* downstairs and that, although it was not according to protocol, he must now give him an interview and announce with great pleasure the engagement of his daughter Gabriele to Mr. Peter Melville of the United States’ Diplomatic Service, and lately of the American Embassy at Vienna. Then I told him he must sit down after this interview and write to Gabriele, saying that he had been worried about her happiness, and that after much thought he had changed his mind; that to give her a happy surprise he had announced it to the press, and that he gave her his full and loving blessing and would do all in his power to make up for the misery he had caused her.

“‘Now, Count,’ I said, ‘do you give your word of honour as a gentleman that you will carry out these conditions, not only in letter but in spirit; and that

you will do all in your power to repair the unhappiness you have caused your daughter and my friend?’

“He shot one tiredly malevolent glance at me and then, looking down at the floor, said:

“ ‘I give you my word of honour.’

“ ‘Mason, go and bring up Herr Bühler.’

“So that was that, my dear Stella. Herr Bühler arrived on the scene all smiles and efficiency; took down the announcement between many bows and respectful ‘Herr Graf’s’; and retired beaming, with the second best exclusive story he has ever had—my crash, of course, being the best!

“The letter to Gabriele was duly written, read by me and given to Mason for posting; and the wretched Count piloted down to his carriage by both of us. There was only one funny incident in the whole proceedings, and that was after we had seen him off. I was walking back through the hotel entrance hall when the porter came up to me in quite an agitated state, and said ‘Herr Chester, did not the Herr Graf arrive here injured and bandaged?’ ‘Yes,’ I answered looking him slap in the eye, ‘but I cured him.’ Then I went to the lounge to write a long cable to Peter.

“I feel happy but exhausted—I was never cut out for adventure of this kind—and am going to bed. Julius sends admiring barks.

‘Yours ever,
HOWARD.’

“PS. Reading this •through—I did not know I could write such a whale of a letter, even to you!—I see I never told you what made me jump back as I was about to help the Count sit down. Owing to his jacket falling down over the bandaged arm I had only caught a glimpse of the sling. But as I leant forward to help him, I had a momentary close-up view of that sling, and the instantaneous conviction that it was made of paper! I was right, too; an ingenious trick which ensured that his arm was not hindered as it went into action, with the paper just tearing away.”

Epilogue

(By Howard L. Chester)

I PROMISED I would put down a few notes to round off the story of what happened 'post Salzburg'—as I came to think of that time. Even after so many years, those events are clearer to me than what happened yesterday.

Well, first of all I arranged a veritable American invasion of Schloss Ansbach by getting Stella to accompany Peter on his first visit there, which took place after a shoal of cables had flashed to and fro between London, Zürich and Salzburg, and a few letters between the Count and myself. I will say this for the old devil, he played the game fairly and squarely. He even asked Stella and Peter to stay at Ansbach, an invitation which was gratefully accepted. I believe it was really my beloved Stella who turned a defeated and resentful foe into an almost benevolent ally. She set herself out to charm the Count and she succeeded. She sang to him, flattered him, cajoled him and—I was almost going to say—'vamped' him, in the slang of these days. She told me afterwards that he even got as far as admitting that Peter was quite a decent young man! As for Gabriele, she simply adored Stella, and has continued to adore her ever since. They are together on the terrace at this moment, little thinking I am writing this about them. Nor will Gabriele ever know, bless her.

Looking through the story of that strange and memorable year of 1907, I realise there appears precious little about Gabriele. The truth is I only saw her once 'pre-Salzburg', and did not come to know her well until Peter was posted for home duty in the State Department. Everything I first thought and hoped about her was then confirmed, and I have never known a sweeter girl—except, of course, Stella. The only thing that has saddened her—and all of us—in an otherwise perfect married life, is that she could not have any children.

But I must not wander so much. Events were to take an odd twist after Peter left Innsbruck to return to the Embassy at London, the wedding having been fixed for the autumn in Vienna. Stella was persuaded to stay on at the Castle; but two days before she was due to leave, the Count had a stroke. He lingered on for a week and then died, Stella and Gabriele watching over him to the end. Stella told me that she felt sure he had confessed his son's murder before he died, because the little village priest appeared profoundly disturbed when he left the room.

That, of course, upset all the arrangements, and the American invasion was repeated in melancholy circumstances. This time I arrived, too, along with a dozen or so Laufenthal relatives. On a wonderfully beautiful and peaceful afternoon the Count was buried with his ancestors in the little village cemetery, with the Bishop of Innsbruck officiating.

I must break off again for a moment—this time to blow a small trumpet of my own. I went to see the Bishop next morning, and told him—as it were, in the confessional—the details of the Terfen murder. I asked him, if the parish priest confirmed what I was sure he would, if it were possible to have that little patch of ground bearing the tomb properly—but very privately—consecrated. The old man was very gracious and promised to look into the matter. He did; and the ground was duly consecrated. Gabriele was told in rather vague terms that a special dispensation had been granted, so she was very happy, and so, I hope, is the Count.

After much discussion, the wedding was postponed until the following spring and, as Gabriele had been living in the family house at Salzburg since her father's death, the ceremony took place in the cathedral there; and a magnificent affair it was, too. I was best man, and Stella a sort of matron of honour cum substitute mother. She—like the rest of us—enjoyed herself hugely, and made the stay in that picturesque city doubly memorable for me by accompanying me on a trip which I will mention in a minute or two.

Julius was, of course, not allowed in the cathedral; so he waited with Mason—who hated weddings—on the steps outside. He was specially spruced up for the occasion, with a huge white silk ribbon round his neck, and he held court to an admiring crowd of tourists and natives who had come to watch the bridal pair leave.

Another interruption, but I must just record the fate of Isobel Drummond, who so inopportunately intruded herself into my affairs. When I next returned to London 'post Salzburg', I was drinking with a friend at the Aero Club when one of the members—I think it was Archie Rankin—strolled up, and hearing I was just returned from abroad, said he believed I knew Mrs. Isobel Drummond and had I heard what had happened: to which I said no. It appeared that she had been charged with blackmailing a certain Major G, and had been found guilty and sent to gaol. What a foolish woman. I never received the negative and prints she promised to return; but it did not do her any good. Stella's brilliant idea killed any prospect of their evil use. For a print did appear in at least one New York paper. It raised an eyebrow or two, but Stella's caption succeeded in making me appear quite a rip, and even put me in more than well with the charity-minded matrons of New York City!

Now for the *bonne-bouche* in Salzburg; as far as I was concerned, that is to say. You will remember that Herr Bühler was determined to erect a memorial to 'Brünnhilde' and her crew, on the spot where we crashed. Well, he took the matter very seriously and all was to be ready for the autumn, when I was to attend the ceremony. After the Count died and Gabriele's wedding was postponed I wrote to him saying I should have now to return to America for a spell, but would be back for the wedding next spring. So the memorial

ceremony was also postponed, and took place two days after the wedding. It was a delightful and picturesque affair and one of the most amusingly memorable days of my life. There were peasants in national costume, the local mayor and a train-load of townsfolk from Salzburg, all of whom were conveyed in rustic carriages to the farm, where the farmer and his family had put on—paid for by the *Tageblatt*—a magnificent feast, to be eaten after our return from the forest. Dear Stella consented to be my belle for the day; and the two of us, together with Julius and Herr Bühler, had a compartment all to ourselves on the train; and a special carriage richly bedecked with flowers was waiting for us at the station and led the procession to the farm. You can imagine what we felt with two prima donnas on board, both of whom had the time of their lives. The party was nearly disgraced by Herr Bühler who—remembering Julius's preference for Marsala—came near to making his hero tipsy. But all was well in the end, and the whole affair gave me the greatest pleasure. I always like to think of that monument, standing out there in a little clearing amongst the fir trees, with the great mountains towering above. The monument itself is a small obelisk of polished granite, with a balloon of the same stone blossoming somewhat precariously at the top. On the back, incised into the stone, are the American and Austrian flags, crossed; on the left-hand side is a representation of the collapsed balloon parachuting down with me in the basket; the opposite side shows

Julius floating down in his parachute; and on the front is
an inscription which reads, in translation:

TO THE MEMORY OF
THE BALLOON BRÜNNHILDE
WHICH WAS CRIMINALLY BLOWN UP
IN THE SKY
AND CRASHED ON THIS SPOT
14th JULY 1907
AND OF HER CRLW
HOWARD L. CHESTER
AERONAUT AND OWNER
AND,
JULIUS
A POODLE
WHO BY SUPERIOR SKILL
AND
THE MERCY OF GOD
WERE SAVED FROM DEATH

ERECTED BY PUBLIC SUBSCRIPTION
AT THE SUGGESTION OF HEINRICH BÜHLER
EDITOR OF THE 'SALZBURGER TAGEBLATT'